

THE ROBBER-COUNT

A STORY OF THE HARTZ-COUNTRY

JULIUS WOLFF

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A STORY OF THE HARTZ COUNTRY

BY
JULIUS WOLFF.

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BY
W. HENRY WINSLOW
AND
ELIZABETH R. WINSLOW.

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THE ROBBER COUNT;

A STORY OF THE HARTZ COUNTRY.

CHAPTER I.

UPON the heights overhanging the city of Quedlinburg, in the Hartz country, stands an old imperial castle and palace, a conspicuous object far and near.

This imposing pile was built by King Heinrich the Fowler, and he and his consort, Mathilde, sleep together side by side in the crypt of the chapel, or rather, church, and near them reposes their grand-daughter, also named Mathilde, the daughter of the great Otto.

Frankish and Saxon emperors often made this their place of residence, and held their courts and councils here, and from here the Empress Adelheid, the spirited Theophano, and the above named — the younger Mathilde — ruled over Germany. She was, moreover, the first abbess of the convent founded here by Heinrich, to which he and his successors granted peculiar privileges. Destined for daughters of royal and noble families, it was not bound by the rules of any order, and was only subject to the Emperor himself.

The abbess, chosen by the sisterhood, ranked as princess, and had a voice in the Imperial Diet among the prelates, and was independent within her own domains.

During the four centuries which had elapsed since its foundation, the convent had grown continually richer, and

its inmates more numerous, until, under the Emperor Ludwig of Bavaria, the fifteenth abess, Jutta von Kranichfeld, found herself the ruler of so considerable a territory that a stronger arm than hers was needed for its defence. Such was not wanting the counts of Regenstein having become champions of the convent. Their family seat was a mountain stronghold in the midst of the great Hartz country, and they ruled over an important fief as well as over their own inherited lands.

Between the Oker in the west and the Bode in the east, between the mountains in the south and the lowlands in the north, lay, besides the earldom of Regenstein and the convent of Quedlinburg, the bishopric of Halberstadt, founded by Charlemagne; also the domain of the counts of Blankenburg, scions of the house of Regenstein, and that of the counts of Wernigerode.

At the time of which we speak, Count Regenstein, the abess of Quedlinburg, and the bishop of Halberstadt had all recently assumed their powers and dignities.

Count Albrecht of Regenstein, the eldest of six brothers, had succeeded his father about two years since. Soon after, the Countess Jutta had accepted the office of abess provisionally, and about the same time, the bishop—named, like the count, Albrecht, brother of the Duke of Brunswick—was elected by the chapter after a long contest, and occupied his see, so far, without the sanction of the pope, John XXII., then holding his court at Avignon. The bishop, however, had determined to secure his consecration without it, the archbishop of Mainz agreeing to perform the ceremony, and accordingly, at the castle of Heinrich, a letter of invitation to the bishop's installation was received. The princess hesitated whether or not to accept it. Policy and politeness equally made it desirable that she should be present, but she feared derogating from her

dignity should she appear, as it were, in the train of her haughty neighbor, to the increase of his consequence, he who already strove everywhere for ascendancy. In earlier days, when the same princely roof had sheltered them both, she had been made acquainted with his overbearing temper, and this recollection made it more difficult for the abbess to come to a decision. Those whom she was consulting in her private apartment, at the date when this narrative opens, were the superior, Kunigunde von Woldenberg, and her principal adviser, Willekin von Herrkestorf, chancellor of the chapter, who were both for accepting.

"Consider, gracious lady," said the latter, a thick-set personage, with expressive face and gray hair,— "consider that the most reverent bishop will take it ill, if thou dost not go. Lately he assisted when, for the first time, the cross, with the relics of St. Servatius, was borne by thee through the market-place before the assembled citizens."

The abbess regarded the chancellor with wonder, and asked, —

"Believest thou in truth that the bishop hath bidden us in simple friendliness?"

"What other purpose can he have, princess?"

"The same which, not long since, led him to propose a pastoral visitation to our convent. Thou rememberest how I responded to his arrogance, and thereby cooled our friendship?"

"Perchance the visitation was not seriously purposed," answered Master Willekin. "'The lordly bishop, mayhap, only sought an opportunity to see thee again, and thus to manifest his great admiration.'"

The abbess shook her head, but the superior smilingly nodded assent to the chancellor, and said, —

"So think I; and, in any case, it behooves us all to

accept the hand which he voluntarily offers in conciliation."

"In conciliation, Countess Kunigunde? No, no; I know him better!" exclaimed the abbess. "His disposition is quite opposed to friendliness. Under the long rule of our predecessor, Bertradis, who now rests in the Lord, no bishop of Halberstadt ever tried to interfere in the affairs of our chapter."

"Let that be forgotten, gracious lady," urged the chancellor. "He will not repeat his attempt, and it is the part of wisdom to maintain peace and good-will with our ecclesiastical neighbor. Then, in case of any difficulty, we may hope for his friendly offices."

"What difficulty meanest thou?" inquired the abbess. "Is there ebb-tide once more in the iron chest of Sister Thesauria?"

The chancellor only bowed his head.

"Certainly," exclaimed the superior, pointedly. "How can the treasury replenish itself, when one thinketh not of sparing?"

Abbess Jutta threw a severe glance at her, but remained silent.

"That is not the only difficulty," said the chancellor; "but I know a new source of revenue for our convent."

The abbess looked at him inquiringly.

"Our good city below," he continued.

"The city?"

"Truly. Thou knowest well, illustrious lady, which way the wishes of the council tend."

"Thou wouldst say, toward the Lauenburg," said the abbess, with a frown.

"The city will pay a round sum for its possession, — more than the counts of Blankenburg have offered."

"Shall I sell the fortress of Heinrich the Lion to the highest bidder?" asked the abbess, hotly.

"It is true that the Count of Blankenburg hopes to acquire the fortress, but so long as Leutfried liveth, who was so faithful to Bertradis, of blessed memory, no other shall dwell there. Thou canst say so to thy wise friends of the council!"

"He is full of years, and lieth, moreover, on a sick-bed, whence he will hardly rise," observed Master Willekin. "The fortifications are well-nigh defenceless, gracious lady!"

"Defenceless! If Count Albrecht von Regenstein should hear thee, Master Willekin!"

The abbess said this in her deep, full voice, in a tone of earnest admonition. But the chancellor quickly replied, —

"Count Albrecht von Regenstein! I had him in my mind, in reference to the difficulties which we may have to encounter; it was because of such as he that I urged our standing well with the bishop of Halberstadt. It may well be that we need the aid of the latter against our too powerful protector."

"Master von Herrkestorf," exclaimed the abbess, "there thou speakest like a true Quedlinburger! I know well that they grumble at the count in the city, because occasionally his people carry off a flock of sheep, a few cows, or, perchance, a trifle of merchandise."

"And also burghers whom he attacks on the highway, locks up in his prisons, and will not release," added the chancellor, with warmth.

"Yea, but not without ground for it, as thou shouldst know."

"He prevails with a powerful hand whenever he hath an opportunity; and, therefore, is it that he is called *the robber count*."

"Who calls him so? Thy fellow-townsmen, — no one else; and I wish never to hear that name again, Master

von Herrkestorf!" cried Jutta, excitedly, clasping with a rapid movement a large gold crucifix, hanging from her neck by a chain of the same metal. "He hath strongholds everywhere between Oker and Bode, as if the whole Hartz country were his," the chancellor continued, hotly. "We have certain tidings that he is now negotiating with Prince Bernhard von Ballenstedt for the castle of Gersdorf."

"I rejoice to hear it," answered the abbess, shortly.

"Hear me further, honorable princess," said Master Willekin. "Throughout the Empire the great lords are leagued together, openly or in secrecy, to tyrannize over the cities which are rapidly growing, to their detriment, as they think. After they have subdued them, the turn will come of the great religious houses and spiritual princes, to whose fiefs they aspire, and hope soon to lay hands upon."

"An unnecessary apprehension," remarked the abbess in a contemptuous tone; "the Emperor will never suffer it"

"The Emperor? Gracious heaven! As if he did not have enough to do to hold his own!" returned the chancellor. "I beseech thee, my lady, do not offend the bishop by a refusal. He is thy nearest and most natural ally. Deny him not a small civility, which will cost thee so little."

"Master Willekin is right," said the superior; "let us go to Halberstadt! That is my counsel. That will not derogate from thine own dignity, and thou canst show him that thou art here what he is in his bishopric."

Jutta rose, stepped to the window, and gazed over the landscape toward the mountains in the west.

"When cometh the archbishop to Halberstadt?" she asked, finally, without turning round.

"In ten days," replied the chancellor.

"Then there is time enough yet for decision.

"Not much, gracious lady! May I not, with thy permission, privately inform the cathedral chapter that thou wilt come?"

"In God's name, yea, if it must be!" answered the abbess.

"Only write, Master Willekin," said the superior, "that our beautiful lady will for once appear in Halberstadt in the full splendor of her princely station."

"Bishop Albrecht likes well to look upon beautiful women," observed the chancellor, in a low tone, and with an admiring glance at the noble figure of the abbess, who stood with her back to him, lost in thought, and paying no further heed to the conversation of the others.

It was now almost five years since Jutta had begun her conventual life at Quedlinburg. Her father, a warlike noble, who preferred adventurous expeditions to the security of his home, after the death of his wife had carried his only daughter, then scarcely seventeen, to the court of the Landgrave of Thuringia. She remained three years as maid of honor at the Wartburg, in such favor with the landgravine, a daughter of the Emperor Ludwig, that she wished to keep Jutta with her always; but the hot-headed Count von Kranichfeld quarrelled with the landgrave, and demanded the return of his daughter. The proud landgravine sued in vain. She could only promise the reluctantly departing Jutta her enduring affection, and her assistance in any future troubles, but she could not hinder her father from placing her in the convent of Quedlinburg. Here, also, the lively and talented maiden won the love of all the inmates of the castle, especially of the abbess Bertradis, and before long was made canoness. But this was not enough. Bertradis, knowing that her end was draw-

ing near, expressed a desire that her favorite should succeed her in place of the superior Kunigunde or the deaconess Gertrude von Meinersen, the next in rank.

Thereupon, the Countess Jutta von Kranichfeld was chosen abbess, though she was only twenty-three years of age. When, according to the custom, she appeared upon the market-place of Quedlinburg to receive the oath of allegiance from the council and burghers, her manifold charms and the splendor of her attire enchanted the beholders. She presented herself, surrounded by her household, in a costly robe glistening with gold, a sparkling diadem upon her head, and a long, flowing purple mantle upon her shoulders, conspicuously taller than her women, and even than some of the men. The bishop, Albrecht von Halberstadt, with his canons and priests; the protector of the convent, Count Albrecht von Regenstein, with his brothers; and many other counts and nobles from the neighboring country, with their trains of followers, assisted in the brilliant ceremony.

The Countess Jutta and her ladies, together with the town council, stood upon a raised platform, while the first burgomaster, Nikolaus von Bekheim, read, in a loud voice, the oath of allegiance, the assembled burghers repeating after him, and all enthusiastically cheering the new lady abbess.

Then a great feast was given at the castle, to which the nobles, council, and chief citizens were invited, and at which Jutta received queenly honors. All eyes dwelt with admiration upon her splendid beauty, though the bishop of Halberstadt, who was only a few years her senior, and had been her constant companion at the Wartburg, rendered her special homage.

She gracefully accepted this general devotion as if it were her due, yet, from the very first, bore herself with

gentleness as well as dignity. Although she had sometimes dreamt of obtaining this high prize, she was surprised when it actually fell to her lot, and strove to mollify the mortified superior by seeking her advice in all matters of importance.

One of her first acts was to have a beautiful portal constructed, leading to the burial-place of the abbesses in the crypt of the basilica, as an expression of veneration for their memory; for which she was greatly commended, though by some persons it was attributed simply to her desire to perpetuate her own memory, and to show herself capable of princely acts.

Those who knew her best, knew better, for Jutta was naturally born for such things. Her father's hot blood flowed in her veins, and her vehement, ardent disposition made it as difficult for her to be subject to any one as it was easy to rule. And now that she was clothed with supreme authority in the convent, she expected every one to yield her unquestioning submission.

The only person whom she did not always find tractable was Count Albrecht von Regenstein. In his robust strength and far-seeing mind she recognized a certain element of superiority, and was unable, with all the aid of her princely position, to control him. At the same time, his manly beauty and courtly manners made an impression upon her which she did not attempt to resist, and the heart of the young abbess inclined strongly toward her hero, who already occupied a large share of her thoughts. Present or absent, he exercised no small influence, and she would fain have known his opinion concerning the episcopal invitation, which had been sent to him as well as herself.

It was for this reason that she now gazed longingly toward the west, where Regenstein, with its high, precipitous walls, was sharply defined upon the blue horizon.

CHAPTER II.

As the superior and the chancellor talked earnestly together, the abbess meanwhile seeming to be lost in revery, a waiting-woman approached, with an obeisance, and spoke a few words to her.

A look of pleasure and surprise passed over her face, and she exclaimed, joyfully, after the maid had withdrawn, —

“What think ye? Count Albrecht hath just dismounted from his horse in the court-yard. I am curious to know if he will go to Halberstadt, to be present at the bishop’s installation?”

“I have just come from Halberstadt, gracious lady!” was the quick rejoinder; and lo! there, upon the threshold, appeared the tall figure of the count himself, clad in chain mail, over which he wore a short, sleeveless, murrey-colored surcoat.

“Hast thou accepted or refused the invitation of the lord bishop?” cried the abbess, eagerly.

“Our conversation was about quite another matter,” the count replied.

“Hast thou had an altercation with him?”

“One might, perhaps, call it ‘so,’” laughed he, as he seated himself at the table, opposite the abbess. “Think only, my lady, what artifice this anointed of the Lord hath practised upon me. Months ago, he offered to barter the fortress of Schwanebeck for my castle of Emersleben, inasmuch as this is hard by Halberstadt, and the former is nigh our house of Crottorf. I was satisfied, and we exchanged deeds of conveyance. When he sent me mine,

I looked at his signature, and threw the document unread into a chest. Lo! now he hath summoned me as his vassal to attend his installation. His vassal! I rubbed my eyes, and asked myself what it meant. Then it came to me in a flash. I pulled out the Schwanebeck papers, and, by my soul! it was no deed of sale he had given me, but only one of feudal tenure. I sprang into the saddle, galloped to Halberstadt, and called the bishop to account. He had the effrontery to say that church property could not be sold; he was only able to transfer it to me in fief. I never looked for such knavery. I wished to cancel the bargain, and demanded back the six hundred marks which I had given him to boot. But this honorable churchman scoffed at me; he held me to my deed of sale, and informed me that Emersleben was in good hands. What thinkest thou of this, my lady?"

"I call it a base trick," replied the abbess.

"Yea, is it not? I shall not soon forget it," said the count, vindictively.

"Moreover, thou hast Schwanebeck, in fief, to refresh thy memory, Sir Count," added Kunigunde.

"I thank thee for thy consolation, most feeling of superiors!" replied the count.

The abbess then turned to the chancellor, saying, —

"And what is thy opinion?"

"The most reverend bishop is well versed in worldly matters," he answered. "I think, Sir Count, thou must have misunderstood him concerning this transaction. He is wont to speak out plainly in all things."

"I warn thee to beware of his plainness, Master Wilkin!" exclaimed the count. "Ye Quedlinburgers appear to stand upon an extremely good footing with the bishop."

"Wherefore should we not? He hath never wronged us in any way."

"Yet he turneth those who should be your friends into foes."

"For example: the noble Albrecht von Regenstein. Thou hast allowed us to see that, Sir Count?"

"Thou wilt see something else!" muttered the count, striking the floor with his sword.

"Ho! ho! What is this contention about?" inquired the abbess, with a laugh.

"I have yet another charge against the bishop," continued Count Albrecht. "He hath encroached upon my jurisdiction, and hath set up an ecclesiastical court here in the city; and, moreover, the council appeareth to aid and abet him. Two churls were summoned before my judgment-seat, but, instead of presenting themselves, they were tried here by the rector of St. Agidien. I thereupon seized and imprisoned a couple of burghers as hostages."

"Who were altogether innocent," interposed the chancellor.

"Then let them deliver up to me the guilty ones, that I may deal with them according to justice. So long as an episcopal court is suffered to remain within your walls, so long shall I be a foe to your city."

"Hast thou upbraided the bishop with his encroachment upon thy rights?" asked the abbess.

"In good round terms, my lady! Wouldst thou know what his answer was? 'Spiritual rights supersede secular rights; my crook reacheth farther than your sword!'"

"And thou?"

"I struck the table with my fist, and cried, 'Thou shalt see how *crookedness* and straightforwardness will agree together!' Then I mounted my horse, galloped off, and here I am!"

"And thou meanest to let the matter rest here?"

"I am not such a fool!" laughed Albrecht. "Before he

sitteth upon his episcopal throne, I mean to sit again in my castle of Emersleben, and throw every one of his priest-ridden train into the moat. After that will come the Quedlinburgers' turn. I will show them who is lord here, — I or the bishop."

"Countess Kunigunde," exclaimed the abbess, rising suddenly, "we will not go to Halberstadt!"

"My lady!"

"We do not go to Halberstadt!" she repeated, imperiously.

"Thou canst not be in earnest," groaned Kunigunde; "it is impossible to find a sufficient plea for our absence."

"*Thou* needest not find the plea; I will do that," answered Jutta.

The superior sighed, and looked up to heaven despairingly, while the chancellor began, in a vexed tone, —

"But under what pretext, gracious lady?"

"Pretext!" interrupted Count Albrecht, who had also risen from his seat; "needeth the princess of Quedlinburg an excuse for absenting herself from Halberstadt, if it is her pleasure to do so? But if it troubleth thee, Master Willekin, I will give thee an excuse: the pope hath not sanctioned the bishop's ordination, and never will."

"How dost thou know that, Sir Count?" inquired the superior, defiantly.

"Write to that effect, Master Willekin!" commanded the abbess. "Write to the bishop that, next to the Emperor, the Holy Father is our liege lord, and that we cannot assist at a consecration which, in our eyes, without the papal blessing, is no consecration at all."

"Good! good!" said the count, with emphasis.

The chancellor shook his gray head, and said, —

"At least, permit me, gracious princess, to ride to Halberstadt and soften thy refusal, so far as possible."

"Do so, Master Chancellor," answered the abbess; "thou knowest my wishes."

"That is not the way it should be done," said the count.

"Master Willekin will ride to Halberstadt," continued the abbess, loftily; "the matter is settled, Sir Count."

Count Albrecht laughed aloud. "As far as I am concerned, most mighty princess, he may crawl on his hands and knees to the bishop!"

The blood mounted to Jutta's cheeks, and she turned away indignantly, while the chancellor seemed as if about to make a hasty reply, but to be restrained by the threatening look with which the count regarded him. The abbess gave him a gracious nod of dismissal, whereupon he left the room and betook himself to the city, to seek a private interview with the burgomaster and some of the councillors.

Countess Kunigunde had rejoiced over the check which Count Albrecht had received, as well as at his rejoinder to the abbess, and vexed that her advice should be rejected on account of the overbearing Albrecht von Regenstein. She also withdrew, and left the abbess alone with her arrogant protector.

Albrecht made a low bow behind the departing countess, and observed, when the door closed, —

"I see I am no longer in our amiable superior's good graces, and must bear her displeasure as best I may."

The abbess made no reply. She stood at the window, quite out of tune. The count's scornful laugh had touched her to the quick, and she waited now for a word of explanation. Had he not seen what had decided her in her hesitation regarding the bishop's invitation? To be sure, his state of irritation was some excuse, and Jutta had vexed him still further. That she now regretted. He

must have something on his mind, or why should he still linger. She would come to his aid.

Turning toward him, she said, somewhat shyly, —

“What thinkest thou the bishop will do, if we are neither of us present at his consecration?”

The count shrugged his shoulders. “In the first place, he will be heartily angry, and I care not a whit.”

“Will he credit my reason for refusing?” the abbess asked again.

“Hardly,” returned the count.

“Then he will seek for the real cause; perchance he will fancy it to be — on thy account —”

“That thou stayest away for me?” said Count Albert.

“Well, let him think so; he hath no power over thee.”

Jutta was silent. Finally, she said, —

“What if I should go to the bishop, and heal the breach between you?”

“I thank thee heartily for thy friendly offer, but I could not accept such a sacrifice.”

“I would make the sacrifice with pleasure, Count Albrecht. Thou hast made more than one for me.”

“That is only my bounden duty.”

“Suffer me, for once, to be *thy* protector!” begged the abbess.

“Nay, nay, thou must not go to Halberstadt; at least, on my account. The bishop wisheth not to make peace with me; and if thou wert to go to him, and plead my cause, he would think —”

The count broke off suddenly, without finishing his sentence.

“What? What would he think? Speak out, Count Albrecht.” And Jutta looked into his face with eager eyes.

“Thou wouldst laugh at the fancy.”

“That I shall not!” she said, blushing a little.

"He would think — that I was afraid of him!" said the count, abruptly.

The abbess had expected an altogether different reply. She stepped back.

"Thou art right — quite right; what else could he think?"

Suddenly she threw her head back, and said, —

"After all, I could hardly defend thee, Sir Count. So many complaints are made of thee."

"I prefer, my lady, to defend myself," answered the count, resolutely.

"Little it concerneth me what thou doest in thine own earldom; but here thou shouldst keep the peace," she said, in a tone of reproach.

"Is thy peace disturbed, gracious lady?"

"Thou lurkest about our good city of Quedlinburg, and layest hands on her burghers. That is breaking the peace, Sir Count. But that is not all: the monks of St. Wiperti are very disorderly. Their riotous living, under our very eyes, is a sore vexation to the council and townsfolk," the abbess continued, becoming more vehement.

"And is that my fault?"

"Thou protectest them; thou hast fortified their monastery. Why shouldst thou do it? Is not Gunteckenburg enough for thee, here close to the gates of the city?"

"Aha!" laughed the count; "I know how the town-folk grumble at their inconveniently vigilant neighbor. Thou shouldst be well pleased to know that I keep a sharp eye upon thy city of Quedlinburg. It is not for myself so much as for thee. Down below there they have bristled up stiffly since they joined the Hanse League. Now they oppose me; next they will threaten thee, if we do not hold the reins tightly."

She looked at him kindly, and said, —

“I understood not that thy care was for me, Count Albrecht.”

“One thing I wish to speak to thee about, my lady. Dost thou know how matters stand at Lauenburg?”

Lauenburg! Was this why he remained? A thought darted through Jutta's mind, and she answered slowly, —

“I know Leutfried lieth very low; we shall soon have to appoint a new castellan.”

“It is an important post. Lauenburg needeth a trusty man,” observed the count.

“Whom I hope in good time to find,” she replied, smilingly; and, anticipating his answer, added, with a speaking glance, “Have patience, like me; I shall not give the fortress into other hands behind thy back.”

“I rely upon thy promise, my lady! Farewell!”

“Till we meet again, Count Albrecht!”

The abbess extended her hand to him, and he left the room, while she shook her finger, smilingly, in the direction of the closed door.

The count rode down the steep pathway from the castle in a very contented frame of mind. He had attained his object: the abbess did not mean to attend the consecration any more than he and his brothers. He laughed in his sleeve as he thought of the bishop's feelings when he discovered that the magnates of the territory were missing at his installation. The counts von Blankenburg, who always opposed the Regensteins in everything, would now strut about untrammelled, and wheedle the bishop to their hearts' content. It was doubtful whether the other nobles of the Hartz region would make their appearance; probably not, if Albrecht should send them a well-considered message. He was quite content that the bishop, as well as Willekin von Herrkestorf, should understand that the abbess, with

her noble chapter, remained away, owing to his influence. Then my lord would remember Schwanebeck, and his long crook, with which he had dared to threaten Albrecht von Regenstein.

And, regarding Lanenburg, whose domain touched the forests of Quedlinburg on one side, and on the other those of the Blankenburgs, he had now the abbess's promise not to choose a new castellan without consulting him. What an eyry it would be for his beloved Siegfried, the youngest and the favorite of his brothers. And Jutta? What wish of his would she not grant? He had seen to-day very clearly what sway he had over her. He was now sure that this brilliant woman would gladly resign her princely position, if —

“Brun! Brun! what is it?” cried out the count to his bay, as he stroked his sturdy neck, and tried to soothe the frightened animal. The horse had plunged violently, having been struck by a stone, but the boy who hurled it, the son of one of the captive burghers, remained hidden.

“This cometh from indulging in idle thoughts, instead of keeping a firm hand on the bridle,” said the count to himself, as he rode on.

But the abbess, gazing after the rider, had seen the stone thrown. She stood at the window, following him with her eye, and watching the gleam of the sunlight upon his polished helmet while he slowly descended the hill. As she observed the little adventure, she exclaimed, indignantly, —

“Oh, this worthless brood! He is right; these burghers must be held with a tight rein!”

She soon saw Count Albrecht halt before the entrance to Gunteckenburg, which lay between Münzenburg and the Wiperti monastery. He summoned the governor, and talked to him for a long time without dismounting. Then

he trotted on to the monastery, and entering the court-yard, disappeared from her view.

"Now he goeth again to those sinful 'children of our love,' as the sainted Bertradis was wont to call the monks, with whom she was in continual conflict; but will he inform the wicked prior of our growing displeasure? Go, my knight! I would follow thee willingly to the ends of the earth!"

In the court-yard of the monastery the count dismounted. A lay brother approached, saying, —

"Shall I unsaddle Brun, master?"

"Nay," answered Count Albrecht. "I have halted for a short rest only. Where is the worthy Bavo?"

"In the — in the —"

"In the refectory, naturally!" laughed the count. "At the *wet* vespers, perhaps?"

"Master, to-morrow is the feast of the holy Eustathius the Steadfast," replied the brother.

"And ye must celebrate it!" said the count. "Good; we will assist at the vigils of the holy Eustathius the Steadfast."

And he entered the monastery.

CHAPTER III.

THE superior, Kunigunde, put the whole chapter into commotion on account of the abbess's decision. The older ladies were annoyed not to have their convent represented at the bishop's investiture with due pomp and solemnity, and the younger ones lamented that they must absent themselves from the imposing ceremonial. The abbess saw only unfriendly faces about her, with one exception, — this being the canoness, the beautiful and joyous Countess Adelheid von Hallermund, who possessed the entire confidence of the abbess. She was very well disposed toward their chivalrous protector, and agreed perfectly with the former, that, for his sake, they ought to decline the bishop's invitation. Jutta was fully determined to do so, and on the following evening informed the chancellor that he must delay no longer carrying her refusal to Halberstadt.

There was nothing to do but obey ; and on the next day, as soon as the sun was well up in the heavens, Master Willekin von Herrkestorf reluctantly set forth. With him rode the convent scrivener, Florencius, who had begged as a favor to be allowed to accompany him in the place of a mounted servant.

This Florencius, a lively, shrewd-looking fellow, belonging to a noble but decayed family, was destined for the church ; but not obtaining his ordination, owing to some youthful prank, he had run away from the monastery school of St. Gallen, and became a travelling scholar. As such, some years since, he had come to Quedlinburg, and

appealed to the chancellor for assistance. Master Willekin, to whom he confided the story of his parentage and circumstances, was soon convinced of his knowledge and ability, and gladly gave him a home and a position in the castle under the abbess Bertradis.

Florencius was called "scrivener," because he must have a title; but although he was most skilful in the art of penmanship, there was not enough writing in the convent to keep him employed. He therefore filled up his spare time making headings and beginnings of documents by the score. For example: the introductory words, "We, Jutta, by the grace of God, Abbess of Quedlinburg," etc., displayed themselves on innumerable pages of parchment, with large, gayly illuminated initial letters, entwined with flowers and flourishes of every description. He was also the confidential letter-writer of the inmates, who all liked him on account of his good manners, modesty, and obliging disposition, notwithstanding his occasional inclination to play the wag.

The chancellor had betrayed the fact of his noble birth, which he tried to keep secret by taking an assumed name, and so the ladies of the convent treated him more as an equal than as a servant. He made himself useful in every way that he could,—as reader, singer, and lute-player. In short, he had become the indispensable familiar spirit of the castle.

As they crossed the plain, which stretched from the city to the Weinberg, the chancellor observed,—

"Look, Florencius, how the snow on the Brocken glisteneth in the sun!"

"And here the seeds are sprouting, and the hedges and bushes begin to leave out," answered the scrivener; "but we shall soon have rain."

"How knowest thou that?" asked Master Willekin.

"Hast thou never heard, master, that our deaconess, Mistress Gertrude, understandeth the weather like an old shepherd? She hath a tree-frog, for which she catcheth flies all over the castle, and upon which she relieth for her predictions."

"And are they always fulfilled?"

"Nay, not always," laughed Florencius; "and then the tree-frog is punished by having less flies that day."

"Gracious heaven!" exclaimed Master Willekin; "whence hath she the frog?"

"I was ordered to catch it for her when the preceding one had eaten his last fly. The schoolmistress saith it is venomous."

"The schoolmistress! She is the merriest in the whole chapter, is she not?" asked Master Willekin.

"That is hard to say," Florencius answered; adding, after a short pause, "I believe the eustodian and the singing-mistress surpass her. When they put their blond heads together, some droll trick is sure to be played, over which one laughs for days. One of their jokes was to hang a bell upon the superior."

"Florencius!" said the chancellor, reprovingly.

"Pardon me, master," laughed the scrivener, "but I am forced often enough to assist them; they give me no peace, and if it were not for the Countess Luitgard von Stolberg, who always trieth to excuse the pranks of the younger ones, they would oft fare badly."

"And the abbess?"

"The abbess? Well, master, thou knowest she doth not fret at the superior's ill-humor, and Countess Adelheid loveth better to laugh than to weep. However, lately the young mistresses went too far for once, and they were obliged to make expiation."

Upon a look from the chancellor, Florencius went on:—

“As thou knowest, the deaconess is very skilful in embroiderying tapestry with figures from the lives of the saints, and she obliges the younger gentlewomen to spend tedious hours at her favorite occupation. Recently, she was at work upon such a tapestry, which represented the holy Appolonia, whom thou knowest is continually invoked by sufferers from toothache. Then those crafty damsels devised their roguish plot, and successfully carried it out. Countess Agnes von Schrapelau and the schoolmistress kept the deaconess busy with her fly-trap as long as possible in a remote part of the castle; meanwhile, the custodian and singing-mistress crept into her chamber, and with coarse, hasty stitches furnished the holy Appolonia with puffs of hair on the temples, long nose, and pointed chin, so that her resemblance to the deaconess was quite remarkable. Mistress Gertrude raised a great clamor over the misdeed, and even the indulgent Thesauria placed herself on the side of the injured deaconess, and, in despite of Countess Adelheid’s intercession, the guilty ones were made to suffer. They were sentenced to pass four-and-twenty hours in the little, dark penitential chamber in the crypt. But, in the afternoon, the hereditary marshal of the castle, Master Gerhard von Ditfurt, came to the convent to visit the ladies, missed the two blondes, and was made acquainted with the story. At first he laughed heartily, to the great vexation both of the old cat — ”

“Florencius ! ”

— “Of both the honorable ladies, Kunigunde and Gertrude; but then he besought pardon for the two captives. It was not necessary to plead long; the princess was only too glad to have an excuse for lenity. Countess Adelheid led the supposed penitents from their prison cell, and after an exhortation from our gracious lady, before the whole chapter, the affair was considered ended. Much I wonder what their next sally will be.”

Master Willekin could not refrain from laughter, in which his companion joined.

Whiling away the time with such sportive conversation, the two rode over the green plain. On both sides of them stretched the lofty, dark-blue mountain ridge, rising higher and higher from the fortress of Ballenstedt to the snow-covered summit of the Brocken. Halting upon the top of a hill, they turned their horses' heads, to look at the charming view.

Before them lay fruitful fields and smiling hamlets, watered by the Bode and other mountain streams flowing down from the craggy heights, upon which stood lonely watch-towers, like sentinels. The yet unfinished spires of the cathedral of Halberstadt rose in the distance, while the city of Quedlinburg was hidden from view. Only the castle, of whose inner life Florencius had just given his amusing account, was before them. Behind, through the broad opening of the Bode Valley, they saw the jagged peaks of the Teufelsmauer, which extended, huge and black, through the Hartz country for miles, only ending at Regenstein. Directly opposite, Lauenburg glittered in the sunlight, while in the west, Count Albrecht's stronghold frowned at them; on one side of it was Heimberg, where his brother Bernhard dwelt, and on the other, the seat of the counts of Blankenburg.

From this point the riders could overlook a great part of the noble Hartz region, which lay spread out before them like a splendid panorama, in all the glory of spring. A fresh breeze blew from the hills, making the leaves and grasses rustle and bend, while overhead the larks carolled.

After the two companions had ridden on again for some distance, Florencius said, —

“Master Chancellor, if I do not deceive myself, we are going to meet ‘The Wicked Seven.’ Is not that the

Knight Bock who cometh trotting toward us on his great dapple gray?"

"Thou appearest to be right, Florencius," answered the chancellor; "but let him come; Knight Bock is friendly enough to those who are civil to him."

From the edge of the forest, which lay on their left, three riders issued, two of whom immediately turned aside with the obvious intention of cutting off all chance of escape backward or forward, while the third came trotting toward them.

The latter presented a most fantastic appearance. Upon a bony steed sat a long, lank figure in knightly accoutrements. The man was clad from head to foot in chain armor, and wore, besides, a short, faded, yellow surcoat. Two fluttering cock's feathers were stuck in his helmet, and a woven iron cape enveloped his neck and shoulders, like a capuchin's hood. From the knees projected sharp iron spikes. Polished steel gloves and excessively long spurs completed his equipment. Besides sword and dagger attached to his shoulder-belt, he carried a lance and small triangular shield. His thin, weather-beaten face, with piercing eyes, hooked nose, and long mustache led one to suppose that he was about forty years of age.

Such was the Knight Bock von Schlanstedt, a vassal of Count Albrecht von Regenstein; a bird of prey, who, with six chosen associates, roamed over the land, and swooped down wherever they were least expected. As this wild band did but little good, Bock and his comrades had been christened "The Wicked Seven."

As the knight recognized the two Quedlinburgers, he checked his horse's pace, brandished his lance, and cried out, —

"Hail, Master Willekin von Herrkestorf! also to thee, brave Florencius!"

"Thanks for thy greeting!" answered the chancellor. "It grieveth me, Sir Knight, that thou shouldst have spurred thy good steed on our account; we were not worth thy pains."

"God give me better luck another time!" laughed the knight, turning his horse's head, and beckoning to his two followers, whereupon the other four emerged from the forest and joined the procession.

"I greatly suspect that ye are going to Halberstadt on some weighty errand," Bock continued, as they rode along.

"I have ever marvelled at thy sagacity, Sir Knight," returned the chancellor, roguishly.

"Truly, I never knew whither this road led, save to Halberstadt," put in Florencius.

Bock pointed straight in front of them, and observed, —

"There lieth an excellent farm belonging to our gracious lady. Art thou aware of the fact, Master Chancellor, that they brew rare beer there? A most delectable drink on a dusty spring day!"

"How thou talkest!" laughed Master Willekin.

"We must go thither," remarked Bock; "we must fodder our beasts there."

"So! Is that ~~where~~ thou keepest thine oats?"

"Convent oats are the best, far and wide," replied Bock, with quite an innocent and serious expression.

"And the cheapest," added Florencius.

Whereupon the scrivener received a glance from the knight which convinced him that he had best hold his peace.

Soon arose a lively interchange of opinions as to the strife between the city of Quedlinburg and the Count von Regenstein over his judicial rights and the encroachment of the bishop, of whom the knight spoke but ill.

Bock von Schlanstedt resolutely defended the injured

count, for whom he was ready to go through fire and water. This strange, inconsistent man had attached himself to the house of Regenstein with the most utter devotion. He not only had seen all the seven brothers grow up under his eyes, but he had carried them in his arms, and before him, in the saddle; he had been their faithful attendant and patient playmate, and, later, their instructor in riding, fencing, and tilting.

As a lad, he had run away from his father, a farmer in the village of Schlanstedt, because he had no desire to follow the plough. Hard by Schlanstedt the Regensteins owned a fortress, with the garrison of which the boy became a favorite, carrying secretly to the troopers many a dainty morsel from his father's kitchen. In return, they taught him the art of war, which gave him such distaste for the plough that one fine day he disappeared from his home. He presented himself to Count Ulrich von Regenstein, who, at Bock's earnest entreaty, took him into his service. In course of time the youth became a stalwart squire, winning his master's confidence by his loyalty and reckless courage. In a feud between Count Ulrich and the noble lords of Barby, occasioned by their continual raids into the Hartz country, Bock so distinguished himself that, when the struggle ended successfully for the Regensteins, the count bestowed knighthood upon him. This honor elated Bock greatly in his own esteem, and he endeavored to assume a chivalrous demeanor, though he treated the common soldiers like brothers, sharing with them toil and danger as heretofore.

He possessed nothing. He considered that his horse, armor, sword, and shield belonged to the count from whom he received them, as also the last drop of blood in his body. To be a vassal of the Count von Regenstein was his pride and pleasure, and with the same fidelity that he

had shown to the father he now served the sons, of whom Albrecht was his paragon and Siegfried his darling.

The knight regarded the town and convent of Quedlinburg very differently. Toward the first he was unfriendly, because it tried to curtail his master's rights; but he considered, as a dependant of her protector, that the abbess had the same claim upon the strength of his right hand that he and his horse had, according to his notions, upon her beer and her fodder.

When the riders arrived at the farm, called Münchenhofe, Bock alighted from his horse, and called out to one of his followers, —

“We bide here, Nothnagel!”

Willekin and Florencius accepted a stirrup-cup of the rare beer from the farm bailiff, which they praised highly, and once more started on their way.

“I trust the worthy bishop will receive thee graciously, Master Chancellor,” the knight called out after him; “but I fear thou wilt have trouble with thy message.”

“I doubt not that he will listen to it with both ears,” answered Master Willekin, turning round in the saddle.

“And invite thee to be his guest, out of gratitude?”

“Only wait, Sir Bock, and see who will have to pay the reckoning.”

“Oh, *we* are in his debt already,” cried Bock, laughing.

“Deep enough, I warrant me!” returned the chancellor, in the same tone.

“We can pay — with this!” and Bock grasped his sword.

But the two riders were now quite beyond hearing.

“Methinks thou art bound upon some crooked errand, Master Willekin!” muttered the lean hero, with a distrustful look after the departing chancellor. “Fill it up, Hasenbart!” said he to another of his companions, as he

handed him the empty jug ; “ but to-day we must not indulge in more than three draughts, or the Quedlinburgers will be out of sight. We must let them think that we stay here, and this was why I bade thee unsaddle the horses. We will follow them at a brisk pace beyond Wegleben, and halt near Emersleben. Our men will pass by Derenburg, and we can light upon them in the neighborhood of Schwanebeck ; the counts Crottorf and Schlanstedt will be of the number.”

“ We shall have our hands full ! ” grumbled Nothnagel.

“ Hands full ! ” repeated Bock ; “ Count Albrecht will be hard by, and we are seven ” ; and thereupon they set to work saddling their horses.

An hour before noon Willekin and Florencius arrived at Petershofe, the stately episcopal palace in Halberstadt, situated on an eminence opposite the cathedral, and strongly fortified.

The chancellor dismounted, saying to Florencius, —

“ Go to my worthy friend, the canon, Herbord Moor, and put up the horses, telling him that he may expect us at the noonday meal. Greet him from me, and say that I will not keep him waiting long.”

The scrivener nodded, and, leading the chancellor's horse, rode to the canon's.

Master Willekin entered the gloomy gateway, passed through the court-yard, and into the palace.

CHAPTER IV.

A YOUNG priest led the chancellor up several steps, through an anteroom into a vaulted corridor, dimly lighted by a hanging lamp, at the end of which was the bishop's private apartment. There, in a spacious, luxuriously furnished room, he left the visitor, and Master Willekin, as he sat there among these unfamiliar surroundings, felt no little trepidation at the prospect of the coming interview.

The bishop did not keep him long in suspense. He soon appeared, clothed in a long purple robe, a slender, youthful figure, with a pale, aristocratic face, to which a pair of dark eyes lent a somewhat imperious expression.

The chancellor bowed low, and Bishop Albrecht welcomed him, saying, —

“And how goeth it with our gracious lady of Quedlinburg?”

“She sendeth thee her friendly greeting, most reverend sir,” answered the chancellor, with another obeisance.

“And announceth to me her intention of assisting at my installation,” added the bishop, a smile of satisfaction passing over his pale face.

The chancellor was silent, and looked down in great embarrassment.

“How? Thou art silent? Thou dost not surely tell me that she is not coming?”

“I would that I could tell thee otherwise, reverend sir,” answered the chancellor, in a low tone.

“She cometh not!” exclaimed the bishop, in displeasure.

Willekin slowly shook his head, while Bishop Albrecht strode through the room, struggling to conceal his vexation. Then, stopping short, and folding his arms, he inquired, haughtily, —

“And, pray, what excuse doth she send for absenting herself?”

His visitor hesitated before he replied, and then said, —

“Reverend sir, there are scruples and considerations which influence our gracious lady; the Holy Father is her spiritual ruler, and —”

“Ha! ha! So that is the reason!” laughed the bishop. “Because Pope John, in his Babylonian captivity at Avignon, denieth me his blessing! I never suspected our beautiful sister, Jutta, of having so tender a conscience. Nevertheless, I trust we shall be able to overcome her scruples.”

“I doubt it, my lord!”

“How? Because I will not cringe and bow before the declining power of the pope, but choose to preserve my independence, the abbess of a free convent, herself an imperial princess, refuseth me this friendly courtesy?” the bishop continued, in indignant astonishment. “Master Chancellor, the true reason is not what you tell me!”

“I scarcely know, reverend sir, how I —”

“Bethink thyself! Thou knowest another reason,” interrupted Bishop Albrecht, sharply; adding, as no answer came, “Look me in the face, Master Willekin von Herrkestorf! Have these scruples originated with the abbess?”

“Nay, indeed, worshipful sir!” replied the other, driven at last into a corner.

“Aha! I will tell thee whence these scruples came. The wind blew from Regenstein that wafted them to her. The count was at the convent?”

The chancellor nodded.

With his hands clasped behind his back, the bishop again strode impatiently up and down.

"Tell me all about it!" he exclaimed, angrily.

"I had just received an order from our gracious lady, in the presence of the Countess Kunigunde, to inform thee that she and her chapter would be present at the consecration. The Count Albrecht came, told of his quarrel with thee, my lord, and —"

"And persuaded the fickle princess to decline," continued the bishop, bitterly. "Oh! I can hear him, and he shall pay for it!"

"Thou hast guessed all, reverend sir," said the chancellor. "I have —"

"Thou hast told me nothing. Nay! nay! As ye will, as ye will, sir count, and my lady abbess! Harken, now, to my answer, Master Chancellor: Announce to thy gracious lady my deep regret at her decision, and my hope that the Holy Father may reward her for it when he heareth of her loyalty."

These words were uttered with an unpleasant laugh, and the speaker's face looked paler than usual. Then he stepped to the table and rang a small bell.

The young priest entered, and received an order, which was inaudible to the visitor.

As the door closed, Bishop Albrecht sat down, and invited the chancellor to take a seat also, saying, —

"Now, let us hear some good tidings of the trade and traffic of the fair city of Quedlinburg."

The chancellor seated himself opposite, and remarked, —

"I have been charged with yet another commission, reverend sir."

Bishop Albrecht listened in silence.

"By the burgomaster, Nikolaus von Bekheim," continued Master Willekin.

"By the burgomaster? To me?"

Master Willekin, who felt sore at the haughty manner in which he had been treated, and now indignant at this pretended surprise, answered, with some irritation, —

"Thou mayst trust me, my lord; I am fully initiated. The council accepteth the alliance with thee."

A gleam of satisfaction passed quickly over the bishop's face, but he repressed it instantly, as he said, —

"Pardon me, Master Herrkestorf; but this is a secret affair, of which I presumed that thou wert ignorant."

Master Willekin understood, and spoke with added vexation, —

"Pray do not forget, my lord, that I am not only chancellor of the chapter, but also a respectable burgher of my native town. I take it for granted that nothing injurious to my gracious lady will be included in your covenant, otherwise I should certainly not have been the bearer of this secret intelligence."

"Doth the council accept my conditions unreservedly?" asked the bishop, coolly.

"It agreeth in the main to thy propositions, but desireth a definite statement of the succor to be expected from thee in certain contingencies, and an exchange of legal documents."

"Oh, these tedious negotiations! But send me your authorized agents."

"Here, — to Halberstadt? That could not be done without the knowledge of those against whom the offensive and defensive alliance is directed. The Regensteins have their spies everywhere. Only to-day, on my way hither, I was beset by them."

"Thou art right. But what wouldst thou advise?"

"Send thy bond to us by a trusty messenger, and we will send ours in return by the same hand."

"Be it so, then," replied the bishop, after a short pause, rising from his seat. "The compact between myself and the city of Quedlinburg is now, I consider, concluded."

"As good as concluded, reverend sir!" answered the chancellor, and shook the bishop's proffered hand.

"Deliver my friendly greeting to the worthy councillors, Master Willekin von Herrkestorf, and forget not what I bade thee say to the noble abbess."

Then he waved a gracious farewell to his visitor who had brought him at once so distasteful and so welcome a message.

As the latter left the palace behind him, with its heavy walls and dark arches, and passed out into the sunshine which gleamed upon the cathedral spires soaring aloft into the blue sky, he breathed more freely. Thoughtful, but, on the whole, not dissatisfied with the result of the interview, he went his way. He had inflamed the bishop's enmity against his own foe, Count Albrecht; he was about to take back to the lady abbess a well-deserved rebuke for her fickleness; he had opposed the independence of the burgher to the bishop's imperiousness, and had brought the desired understanding nearer a conclusion. The more he thought over the result of the conversation the better he was satisfied, and the more briskly he walked toward the dwelling of the jovial canon.

He had no sooner gone than the young priest again entered, bringing with him an older man, whose wrinkled countenance spoke of reserve and thoughtfulness. It was the cathedral provost, Jordan von Donfus, a devoted adherent of the bishop, whose zeal had been rewarded by the first place in the cathedral chapter.

The bishop advanced to meet him, exclaiming, —

"Jordanus, she is not coming!"

"Did not I say so, reverend sir, a sennight since?"

"But thou knowest not the cause."

The provost looked down thoughtfully for a moment, and then said, —

"I know of many possible excuses, but only one true reason, and that is — Count Albrecht."

"How can I be revenged, Jordanus?"

"On the abbess, by forgetting her existence; and on the count —"

"By a struggle to the death!" interrupted the bishop, impetuously.

"Nay, he is too powerful," answered the other with composure; "we must lay snares for him, cross his pathway, hinder his designs, and force him back, step by step, till we have thoroughly enfeebled him."

The bishop shook his head.

"That doth not suit me, provost! I would strike vigorously, blow upon blow. The purchase of Wegeleben and Schneitlingen will be concluded to-morrow, and on that account I sent for thee. With the possession of the latter I plant my foot in Swabia, and Wegeleben inserteth itself like a wedge in the midst of the Regenstein province."

The provost nodded quietly, and then said, —

"In sooth, if thou dost not take it, Count Albrecht will, as he hath taken the castle of Gersdorf."

"Hath he done so already!"

"Probably; in no case will he allow it to escape him."

"We must gain more territory, to increase our power," said the bishop, becoming more and more stirred. "I will not rest till I see the Count von Regenstein at my feet. He alone hindereth the abbess from coming to my consecration, and he shall answer for it."

"It is an untimely circumstance, on account of the archbishop."

"Verily! What will he think, if the abbess and count both fail us?"

"And the others, — the counts of Mansfeld, Hohnstein, Stolberg —"

"Have they declined likewise?" the bishop asked, gloomily.

"Not yet; but believest thou that they will come, if the Regensteins remain away?"

The bishop stamped his foot.

"And all this is owing to one man! But I will crush him, Jordanus! I will crush him!"

"Then thou must make up thy mind to a bitter conflict, most reverend sir!"

"I have done so, and it will be for the mastery of this Hartz region. Only one of us can be ruler, and *I* will be he!"

"If thou wert more sure of the towns," observed the provost.

"Osterwiek is true to me, Quedlinburg is coming over to us, and only our dear Halberstadt is not to be trusted," answered the bishop thoughtfully; adding, "Send a messenger early to-morrow morning with a letter to the Prince of Anhalt, saying I accept his conditions, and consider myself from this time possessor of Wegeleben and Schneitlingen."

"It is at least a beginning," remarked the provost.

"Yea, the first step in the struggle with the count; the struggle for supremacy in this province."

As the bishop parted from the cautious provost, with these words on his lips, he knew not that the first step had already been taken, though not by him, indeed. Yet he was to hear of it before the day was over.

Toward evening, as he was musing alone, a serving-man entered, with troubled looks, exclaiming, —

"My lord, Glefing is without, the governor of Emersleben, and wisheth to speak with thee; he is wounded."

The bishop sprang up, as if he had received a blow.

"What sayest thou? Glefing wounded? Bring him here!"

He was filled with dismay, and could scarcely wait till the man had made his appearance.

The soldier carried his right arm in a sling, and was pale and weak from loss of blood.

"Glefing! What hath happened?" cried the bishop, before the wounded man could utter a word. "Were the Regensteins at Emersleben?"

"Alack, most reverend sir, they are there still."

"Thou dost not mean to tell me that they have seized the castle?"

"Yea, my lord, I do. The five counts came all at once, Count Albrecht at their head, with twenty horsemen and their foot-soldiers from Regenstein, Derenburg, Schwanebeck, and Crottorf, and Bock von Schlanstedt, with his men. The gate was secured, and the bridge drawn up, but before we could raise our cross-bows they were on the walls, and assaulted us with all manner of missiles. At first they gained no advantage, and many of them were shot down, but we were greatly outnumbered, and too hard pressed. When they were once inside the gate, Count Albrecht called to me to surrender, else would he slaughter us all. I refused, and we had a hot scuffle, till I was slashed in the arm, and then all was over. Three of us lay dead, and four wounded. They threw us out, and have strongly garrisoned the castle. Emersleben is again in the hands of the Regensteins."

The bishop meanwhile sat by the table, his head upon his hand, listening in silence to the governor's report.

"That is not all, my lord," added Glefing.

“Hast thou any more croaking to do, thou bird of ill omen?”

“Only a message from Count Albrecht. He bade me say, my lord, that the sword greeteth the crosier, and that when one cannot get an honest deed of sale, one must get one’s rights as one can.”

“Go to the — leech, and get thy wound dressed,” snarled the bishop.

The man departed, with neither thanks nor farewell, while his master strode to and fro, muttering imprecations against Count von Regenstein.

At length, somewhat more composed, he said to himself, —

“Ah! well! What we have lost in Emersleben we must try to regain in Wegeleben.”

It was late when he betook himself to rest, and even then he tossed about on his couch a long time before slumber came to refresh the wearied brain of the ambitious prelate.

CHAPTER V.

INDULGING in empty threats, and then letting the matter drop, was not Count Albrecht's way. He had said to the abbess that he would first regain Emersleben, and then come to a reckoning with the town of Quedlinburg. He had carried out the first part of his design, and now he was ready to fulfil the second. He chose for the purpose the day on which the Prince Bernhard, of Anhalt, invested him with the castle and jurisdiction of Gersdorf.

After the ceremony of feudal investiture had taken place on the spot, according to the customary usages, and Albrecht had installed his brother, Günther, as castellan of Gersdorf, he rode with the youngest, Siegfried, and a small body of troopers, directly to Quedlinburg. Near the city stood the municipal strongholds of Tackenburg and Stumsburg, and also the high tree, not far from the stone bridge gate. This was a mighty linden, under which was an old seat of justice, where nobles were tried, and where, in the thirteenth century, division was formally made of the territory of Brunswick between the dukes Albrecht and Johann, the ancestors of the two lines of Brunswick-Lüneburg and Brunswick-Wolfeubüttel.

As the riders approached the place, Albrecht's horse became unruly, and at first refused to proceed. After some difficulty he forced the beast to go on, saying, at the same time, to Siegfried, —

“It is passing strange; but Brun seemeth to scent blood, as if he knew how many a brave man had been condemned to death here. God forbid that a Regenstein should ever stand accused under this tree!”

"Amen!" answered Siegfried. "Albrecht, what should put such thoughts into thy head?"

"I know not," his brother replied; "but animals will perceive things of which men divine nought, and I always heed the little dumb signs of horse and dog, trusty comrades, who seldom deceive us."

They rode through the massive gateway, the burghers wondering much at the unexpected visit, and casting sullen glances at Count Albrecht, albeit they did not fail to salute him as he passed; but the matrons and maidens admired the two knightly figures, Siegfried especially. The latter went on to Gunteckenburg, where he was to wait for his elder brother.

Count Albrecht dismounted in the market-place, in front of the council-house, gave his horse to an attendant, and strode up the broad steps, and through the door, over which a great imperial eagle was carved and painted.

He had ascertained that there was to be a session of the council this afternoon, and it was for that reason that he had come to-day. He pushed the man aside who was about to inform the assembled councillors of his arrival, and entered the hall unannounced, where his sudden appearance caused much surprise.

"Pardon me, respected sirs, for breaking in upon your weighty deliberations so abruptly, but I wish to speak a few serious words to you in peace and friendship," he began.

Refusing the chair which the town notary offered him, he continued, in a resolute tone, —

"Ye know, I woen, burgomasters and council, my opinion regarding the spiritual court set up here in the city by the reverend bishop of Halberstadt; and in case any of you should be ignorant of it, I say to you, therefore, that I will not suffer this encroachment upon my pre-

rogative any longer. Hath any burgher of your city had injustice done by me? Hath he been denied his rights, or sentenced too severely?"

"Most noble Count," answered the first burgomaster, "*we* have not established the spiritual court; but, as thou hast said thyself, the reverend bishop of Halberstadt."

"But thou hast tolerated it!" exclaimed the count vehemently, striking the bar in front of the council table with his mailed hand.

"The bishop hath put a judge here to take cognizance of spiritual matters only, Sir Count," urged the burgomaster.

"Spiritual or secular," cried the count, "whoever appealeth to the law, priest or layman, must be tried by a legitimate court. Any poor sinner in trouble can sneak to his father confessor, and the bishop may settle all church matters, but I only have the right to administer justice in the Emperor's name; I or my appointed substitute. Do ye agree to that? Dare ye deny it?"

"We must admit it," said the burgomaster, after a rapid glance at the assembly, who assented, with a low murmur.

"Now, then, ye know what ye have to expect," the count went on. "I will fine you three hundred silver marks for every sentence pronounced by any other than my appointed representative. Every burgher of your town will be held responsible! And now, worthy burgomaster, I request thee to accompany me, with two councillors, to the Franciscan monastery, that we may, on the spot, prohibit any more intermeddling by the reverend bishop of Halberstadt."

What were they to do? The count did not look as if he would wait long, and they well knew how heavy his hand was when it descended in anger upon the town. They dared not exasperate him now. The session was ended,

and the burgomaster obliged, with two councillors, to follow Count Albrecht to the Franciscan monastery. Then two monks were immediately sent to require the presence of the rector of St. Agidien. The Count von Regenstein ordered him, in a few blunt words, to renounce his office of judge, and swear, in God's name, from this time forth, to undertake no case whatever. Upon the priest's refusal, Albrecht threatened to drive him out of the city, and imprison him in the tower at Regenstein. Then the rector yielded, and took the oath in the presence of the councillors, the prior, and several of the monks.

Thereupon the count and his followers rode away, and it was not until he had passed out of the gate that the council and burghers breathed freely once more. It was as if a water-spout had been hanging over the town, portending death and destruction, which had now disappeared. Certainly, Count Albrecht did not take with him an increase of affection on the part of the Quedlinburgers, but the bishop's spiritual court was at an end, and the count hoped to live awhile in peace. But quiet at Regenstein was not to last long. Bock von Schlanstedt took care of that.

This worthy, who never took off his armor, and was happy only in the stirrup, burning to look at the newly acquired fortress of Gersdorf, set off thither one day, with his six comrades, and, in the absence of Count Günther, spent a night there.

The next morning, wishing to return to Regenstein, the seven took the road which led by Quedlinburg. Bock rode slowly in front, and the others followed at a short distance. Two of the latter had been present the day before at the installation of the bishop, at the count's command, in order that he might learn which of the neighboring nobles had assisted at the ceremony.

They now described to their companions the magnificence of the procession through the gayly decorated town, the solemn consecration in the cathedral, and the revels afterward in the episcopal palace and council house.

"Holy Virgin!" cried Nothnagel, "I tell thee there was a display of clothes and armor, jewels and banners!"

"And priests enough, I warrant thee," said Hasenbart. "I believe every blessed one came from ten miles around."

"And the neighborhood is as full of church lands as a wine-vat of grapes," observed another.

"Think ye that many of the nobles who were bidden, stayed away?"

"None of our counts were there," replied Nothnagel; "neither were the Mansfelds, the Hohnsteins, or the Stolbergs."

"Nor our gracious lady of Quedlinburg," interposed Hasenbart. "I strained my eyes to see her, but she was not there. God knoweth the reason."

"Because she doth not approve of the bishop."

"He had much difficulty over his election till he got into the chapter," said Nothnagel. "They say, in Halberstadt, that the pope is against him."

"He is not in the Emperor's good books, either," added another.

"We did not trouble ourselves about *him*," laughed Hasenbart; "we caroused to our heart's content."

"And drank your fill?"

"Yea, brother, that we did. The count put money in our purses, because we wore the Regenstein colors. We made ourselves at home with the council guard, and other good fellows. The bishop's followers were wroth because we would have nothing to say to them."

So the pair went on telling their adventures. But as they neared Quedlinburg, Bock rode to the top of a hill,

lying east of the town, and halted there. From this point they could overlook the surrounding country. At their feet lay the many-towered city, behind which rose the castle of the abbess. They also could see the Wiperti monastery and the Gunteckenburg, and in the distance the high mountain ridge, which enclosed the picture like a frame.

The spot, a "Hun's grave," encircled by a rampart, on the summit of the hill, was called "the Bockshorn."

The knight reined in his horse, in order to see how near the city he could safely venture without running the risk of capture by the council's men-at-arms; also to discover any stray cattle or incautious burghers, whose capture might, perhaps, please his master. To judge from their appearance, the "Wicked Seven" had not received their title for nothing. Their bold, battered faces, with shaggy hair and bristly beards, their patched-up armor and their ill-conditioned horses gave them a look of losels such as no honest Christian would willingly encounter. Their weapons, moreover, did not promise child's play. Stout lances and clumsy swords were most conspicuous, but, in addition, each carried a light cross-bow, with a stout mace slung at the saddle-bow, while their helmets bore marks of many a hard blow.

Nothing was to be seen which promised booty, so the riders dismounted, and threw themselves upon the ground. After an hour of fruitless waiting, Fenerlein, one of their number, who had been placed as sentry, called out suddenly, —

"Sir Knight, there come wayfarers!" and he pointed, as he spoke, toward Ballenstedt.

The others were on their feet in a moment, and gazed earnestly in the direction indicated, where they could descry a little group of travellers on horseback.

"I can count six horses," said Fenerlein.

"I see only four riders," Hasenbart declared.

"Thou art right. Two of the horses are pack-horses."

"Are not the two foremost, women?" asked Bock.

"Yea, surely," returned Springwolf.

"But behind ride two men," said Nothnagel.

"The foremost are likewise men," rejoined Hasenbart.

"Nay, nay, they are women! Those behind are men. They have steel helmets, and the women wear mantles."

So they talked all together, while hastily examining buckles and straps, to see that all was in order for a rapid descent.

"Two gentlewomen with two pack-horses, and accompanied by two soldiers. We must find out what this meaneth," said Fenerlein.

"Now one of them pointeth hither."

"They see us."

"Quick!" ordered Bock. "We must catch them. Hasenbart and Gutdünkel to the right, Fenerlein and Springwolf to the left! Nothnagel with me! Rupfer, bide here and watch, lest any escort cometh from the city to meet them. Forward!"

Instantly they were in the saddle, and dashed off to the right and left, while Bock and Nothnagel galloped directly toward the travellers.

The latter soon saw that they were surrounded, and the women became frightened. Flight was out of the question, and when Bock observed that it was not to be attempted, he raised his hand, and his four comrades made their appearance, on either side of the wayfarers, at a little distance, but not offering as yet to lay hands upon them. Bock now slowly approached.

"Eilika, what shall we do?" asked one of the damsels, in distress. "Shall I give my name, and say that I am on my way to the abbess at the castle, or shall I not?"

"Do not tell thy name, gracious lady!" urged one of the soldiers.

"My lady! I have a thought," said the maiden addressed as Eilika. "In our travelling mantles we cannot be distinguished. Let us exchange parts; I will play the lady, and thou canst be the maid. Perchance this may save us."

"As thou wilt, Eilika!" answered the other, with trembling voice. "God protect us!"

"Veil thyself," whispered the maid.

Half a bow-shot from the strangers Bock halted, Nothnagel behind him. The others levelled their cross-bows, and all six eyed the travellers as a wild beast eyes his prey.

"Courage!" whispered the maid, half to herself, half to her mistress; "only boldness will save us. I will use my tongue freely."

"Halt!" cried Bock, as the party slowly advanced, in apparent unconcern.

The women reined in their horses, their faces closely veiled.

"I regret, gentle ladies," said Bock, sarcastically, "that I must incommode ye by taking ye another road. We will ride the same way, if ye will kindly submit to our company!"

"Truly, Sir Knight," replied Eilika, in a lofty tone, which sounded quite natural, "peradventure the roads are not safe from freebooters."

"Fear not, gracious lady. I will take thee under my protection. Only come with me! Here, to the right, is the way."

"What meanest thou, Sir Knight? I think we are close to our journey's end."

"I will inform thee, my lady, when we are at our journey's end," answered Bock.

"So we are thy prisoners; defenceless women, Sir Knight!"

"I will not conceal it from thee, gracious lady," Bock replied, with a stiff bow. Then, beckoning his men to him, and pointing to the two soldiers, he said, "Take away their armor and weapons!"

This was speedily done, and the *cortege* turned to the right. Bock rode in front, near the women, who looked mournfully toward the castle which they were leaving farther and farther behind them.

"Sir Knight," began Eilika again, "I see that we are in thy power, but I trust thou wilt not deny me a request."

"Surely not, lady, if thou wilt not ask me to leave thee."

"I have an uncle in Quedlinburg who is anxiously awaiting my coming," Eilika resumed. "He will suffer great uneasiness. At least, permit my maid to return to the city, and carry tidings of me to my dear uncle."

"An uncle in Quedlinburg!" exclaimed Bock; "and to whom thou wouldst send thy waiting-maid? Nay, my lady, I must refuse thy petition. Thou appearest to be a dame who needeth an attendant, and at my lord's castle waiting-maids are not so plenty that thou canst dispense with thine."

A sigh escaped from the supposed attendant.

"It is not courteous of thee to refuse, Sir Knight," continued Eilika.

Bock shrugged his shoulders in silence.

After they had crossed a shallow part of the Bode, he led his captives in a wide circle around the great meadow called "The Seven Hides of Land," and then over a bridge by the Brunlaken Mill, which belonged to the abbess, and where the knight was too well known for any one to

attempt to free the prisoners. The miller stood in the doorway of the noisy mill, and Bock cried out, —

“Goo l day, Master Krage! Had I time, I would take a sack of meal.”

“Thy haste suiteth me excellently well, Sir Knight,” answered the miller, and Bock rode on, with a laugh.

As they passed beneath the gallows hill, he said to the maiden, —

“Look not up, lady! Unsightly things are swinging up there!”

The young women shuddered, and turned away, and after crossing other hills, they came to a level plain, where Rupfer joined them. The two maidens conversed together in low tones. Finally, Eilika inquired, —

“What is thy name, Sir Knight?”

“Bock von Schlanstedt,” he replied with an important air, unconsciously rising in his stirrups. “Hast thou not heard of me before?”

“God be praised! Never before, Sir Bock von Schlanstedt!” rejoined Eilika, humorously. “And thy lord’s name?”

“Count Albrecht von Regenstein!” exclaimed Bock, still more proudly.

The pretended waiting-woman made a hasty movement, which might express either gladness or dismay. Evidently, this was a familiar name to her. She threw back her veil, and looked the knight full in the face.

Bock, somewhat embarrassed, turned to the other.

“Gracious lady, thine attendant hath unveiled herself. Wilt thou not also uncover thy face?”

Eilika laughed, and followed her mistress’s example.

“Likewise fair!” exclaimed Bock. “I should say, still fairer. Most gracious damsels! I beg to know thy names.”

"That we will tell thy lord," replied the supposed maid, with a firmness which so astonished the knight that, for some time, he preserved a thoughtful silence.

Suddenly, however, he drew up, and said to the captive soldiers, —

"Dismount, and be off with ye! No one will pay a ransom for *you*. Ye are of no service to us, but your horses we want."

"We will bide with our mistress," replied one of the men.

"Make no resistance, but be content that ye escape with your skins. Quick! Dismount!"

The soldiers were obliged to obey, and Bock's followers led the riderless beasts by the bridle, as well as the two pack-horses.

"Greet the dear uncle in Quedlinburg for me," Bock called, in a jeering tone, after the crestfallen men, who were obliged to trudge homeward on foot as best they might.

The others journeyed onward. Not far from Regenstein they met a fellow, who stood stock still beside the road, gazing at the procession. He evidently knew the captive maidens, for he cried out, —

"A lucky catch for thee, Sir Bock! What a ransom thou wilt get!"

"The devil take thee, old bone-bag!" answered Bock, as he rode on, very well satisfied with himself.

In the afternoon, "The Wicked Seven," with their prisoners, passed over the drawbridge, and through the gateway of castle Regenstein.

CHAPTER VI.

ON the self-same day the six brothers were gathered together in the castle of Regenstein. Ulrich, the third canon of Hildesheim, was visiting Bernhard, the only married brother. Poppo, who commanded the fortress of Crottorf, had come to Regenstein with Günther, while the youngest, Siegfried, still dwelt with Albrecht in the castle where he was born.

They had talked much of the events which had recently transpired in the Hartz country, but it was not for that they had come together. What had brought them here was the anniversary of the death of their father, Count Ulrich, who had been an example to them of all knightly virtues, and they solemnly observed it, as they always had observed that of their mother's early death. About half-way between Regenstein and Heimburg stood the retired monastery of Michaelstein, in a lovely wooded glen. It was founded in the twelfth century by Beatrix of Quedlinburg, and about sixty years before, a Count Ulrich von Regenstein had been abbot of the monastery, where the mortal remains of generations of this family now repose.

There it was, in the little gray stone church, that the worthy abbot said a solemn mass for the deceased count, and there the six brothers, with Reginhild, Bernhard's wife, knelt before their parents' tombs. Behind their masters knelt also their trusty retainers, and in the background were the gray-headed abbot and his monks, who stood with folded hands silently regarding the devotions of the family.

The memorial stones of their parents were set upright in the wall, with that of the youngest son Otto, the last name in the long ancestral line. On each stone was carved a life-size effigy, bordered by an inscription. Count Ulrich was represented in full armor; in the right hand a helmet, with crest and mantling, and in the left the small triangular shield, and, like his wife, he was represented standing upon a hound. Countess Bia was clothed in long, flowing robes, with a band wound around the head and chin, and in the folded hands she held a wreath of roses.

The peaceful garden and graveyard of the monks lay half in shadow, half in morning sunshine, which lighted up the pillars of the cloister, and cast sloping shadows across its stone floor. From the garden came the fragrance of spring, and violets bloomed among the graves. Deep silence reigned everywhere; one only heard now and then the low clink of sword or spur.

Finally, Count Albrecht made a movement. He offered the kneeling Reginhild his hand, and they rose, the others following their example. They passed slowly through the cloister, accompanied by the monks, chanting as they went, to the monastery gates, and there, mounting their horses, the procession returned to Regenstein.

At the mid-day meal, as the brothers sat around the hospitable board of the eldest, they talked of the departed father, recalling his words and deeds, and swearing to follow in his footsteps, to maintain the power he had left them, and in sorrow and in joy to stand by one another till death.

The little circle around the table in the paved hall, whose walls were decorated with stags' antlers and other spoils of the chase, and the armor and weapons of deceased ancestors, presented an attractive picture.

There sat six brave men, whose every movement betrayed conscious strength and self-reliance, with one young and gracious woman in their midst. Bernhard, the second brother, stood faithfully by Albrecht in the government of the earldom, and his wise counsel was of great value in restraining the vehemence of the elder. The third, Ulrich, who had not entered the church of his own choice, but to gratify the wish of his mother, found it difficult to hide his chivalrous bearing beneath the canon's robe, and to renounce the knightly exercises to which he had from childhood been accustomed. The other three, Poppo, Günther, Siegfried, were young giants, whose faces already spoke of manly confidence. Siegfried, who was but twenty, was handsome and impetuous, the favorite of all who knew him, especially of all women. A sunny atmosphere seemed to surround him, and one could readily see, by looking at the lad, what a warm and dauntless heart beat within his youthful breast.

After the meal was finished, Poppo and Günther took the chess-board, while Siegfried seated himself in the deep recess of the window, talking merrily with Reginhild, and the three elder brothers remained at the table engaged in earnest conversation.

Ulrich told them that a friendly canon of Halberstadt had recently made him a visit, and repeated some threatening expressions on the part of the bishop, which indicated far-reaching designs for checking the power of the Regensteins.

"I can well believe it," observed Albrecht; "the Emersleben affair sitteth ill on his stomach. Dost thou learn of anything definite?"

"Nay; I could learn nothing further from my friend. It appeareth to me that something is on foot between my lord bishop and the town of Quedlinburg."

"It would not surprise me if the two leagued together against us," said Albrecht. "The bishop is striving in every way to increase his power, in order to limit ours."

"Couldst thou not discover something from the two Quedlinburgers whom thou hast in the keep?" asked Bernhard.

"I set them at liberty this morning, in honor of the day. But they knew nothing, I am sure."

"What shalt thou do, in face of the strong fortification which the bishop is erecting in Wegeleben?" Bernhard inquired.

Albrecht was silent.

"Would it not be wise to strengthen Harlseben and Difturt, so as to render Wegeleben harmless?" asked the canon.

"Nay," said Albrecht, "I know something better than that."

The brothers looked at him expectantly, and he continued, —

"We must get possession of Lauenburg!"

"Lauenburg!" repeated Bernhard, amazed. "Albrecht, we have hardly got our hands upon Gersdorf! And they begrudge us that, moreover!"

"And — the abbess?" asked Ulrich.

"She hath promised me not to dispose of Lauenburg without my knowledge."

"And if she doth not keep her word?" suggested Bernhard.

"Jutta always keepeth her word," said Albrecht, positively.

"He cannot help knowing, Bernhard, how his beautiful friend regardeth him," laughed the canon. "I count upon seeing her yet mistress of Regenstein."

"Urge me not, Ulrich! I am not made for wooing and

wedding," said Albrecht. "It is my place to uphold and extend our power in the land; Bernhard hath already taken care that our house shall not become extinct, and there are three more to hand down our name," he added, glancing at his younger brothers.

Ulrich and Bernhard smiled at each other, but said nothing, and Albrecht went on to explain the importance of Lauenburg, and the necessity of possessing it in fief.

Meanwhile, in the window, Reginhild, with a smiling face, was listening to her young brother-in-law's enthusiastic account of a tournament in Ballenstedt, where he had been dubbed knight by Prince Bernhard, and had been crowned by a fair maiden. It was a green wreath of oak and ivy leaves, wound with a gold-embroidered band, and made by the same maidenly hand which placed it on his blond head, as he knelt down for the purpose. Now it hung, sear and brown, in Siegfried's bedchamber, beside his couch, so that his first glance in the morning might fall upon this modest token of victory, and in his heart a great longing had arisen to see again the lovely giver.

"Dark brown hair and clear blue eyes! Reginhild, thou hast never seen any one so wonderfully beautiful," Siegfried exclaimed, enthusiastically.

"And hast thou never seen the maiden since?"

"Nay," sighed the youth, looking sadly at his sister-in-law.

"But why hast thou not long ago ridden to her father's castle?"

"Alas! I know not her name, nor where she dwelleth."

"Hast thou asked no one?"

"Nay, Reginhild; but dost thou know what I would wish to do?"

"What is it, Siegfried?"

“Mount my horse and ride through the whole Hartz country, from castle to castle, till I found her.”

“And what wouldst thou do then?”

“Then? Why, I would kneel before her again, and look into the clear eyes of my lily once more.”

“Thy lily?”

“I call her so,” said the youth, blushing, “because I know not her real name, and because she looked like a lily.”

“How old is she?” asked Reginhild, in order that she might learn some further particulars about the fair unknown.

“A year or two younger than I,” answered Siegfried. “I can see her now, — but she hath long since forgotten me!”

“Who knoweth, Siegfried? Who knoweth?” laughed his sister. “We must seek for her, till we have found her.”

Then she named the maidens of the noble families in the surrounding country, but in vain. None of Reginhild’s descriptions corresponded with the image which Siegfried carried in his heart. The blue eyes and the dark hair together gave them especial trouble, and Reginhild was even obliged to confess that she could not swear to the color of the eyes of her best friend.

“Checkmate!” Günther suddenly called out so loudly that the pair in the window started, and the elder brothers turned around and gazed at the two hot-headed chess-players.

“Checkmate! checkmate!” repeated the victor. “Now thou must give me the sparrow-hawk! I can use it at Gersdorf.”

“Thou shalt have it!” laughed Poppo, and while he spoke, Bock von Schlanstedt entered the hall.

CHAPTER VII.

"HA! Bock, where hast thou been hiding?" cried Count Albrecht to his vassal.

"I have been lying over night at the fortress of Gersdorf, Sir Count," answered the knight, "and returned by way of Quedlinburg, bringing with me two captives and six horses."

"Captives!" The count shook his head. "Let them go! I want no captives to-day."

"They are ladies."

"Indeed!" laughed the count; "thou must be out of thy senses, Bock, to bring gentlewomen here, to be a burden upon our hands."

"It is a high-born damsel, with her waiting-woman, Sir Count," answered Bock; "and Hinze Habernack told me that there would be a large ransom paid for her at Quedlinburg, and he ought to know."

"What is the maiden's name?"

"She said she would only tell thee that."

"It is hardly worth my while to hear it," returned the count. "Bring her to me!"

The knight opened the door and beckoned, and the maiden entered. Without deigning to cast a look upon Bock, she swept proudly by, while he stood aside with a long face.

She courtesied gracefully, blushing a little at the presence of so many men, and gazed at the only other woman present, as though invoking her aid.

Siegfried seized Reginhild's hand, and held it so tightly that the pressure was painful to her. He seemed rooted

to the spot, and stared at the charming figure of the new-comer with open eyes. She had the complexion of a lily, and her hair was dark, though her eyes were blue.

Count Albrecht arose, and said, politely, —

“Mistress, thou hast been captured without my knowledge or authority. Be not uneasy; thou shalt be treated with all respect. How shall we address thee?”

“Countess Oda von Falkenstein, sister of the Count Hoyer,” answered the maiden, with dignity.

Gestures and ejaculations of astonishment followed this announcement, and Bock appeared visibly alarmed.

Count Albrecht glanced at the knight sternly, and cried,

“The Countess of Falkenstein my prisoner! It cannot be!”

But at this moment Siegfried sprang forward with a glowing face, exclaiming, —

“Albrecht, I know the gracious countess; it was she who placed the crown upon my head at Ballenstedt.”

Oda bowed to him slightly.

“Verily? I will make thee, then, her knight and protector!” answered Albrecht. “Thou must be answerable for her well-being.”

A look of gratitude beamed from the eyes of the youngest brother.

“Be seated, noble Countess,” continued Albrecht, “and pardon the mistake of my vassal. Those whom thou seest here are my brothers, and this is Countess Reginhild, my brother Bernhard’s wife. To-morrow, Siegfried shall safely conduct thee whithersoever thou wilt.”

Reginhild approached Oda, and taking her hand, spoke kindly to her, and offered her refreshment. “We spoke of thee but now,” Reginhild said. “How singular!”

“Of me!” repeated Oda.

“Yea,” interrupted Siegfried. “I was recounting my

adventures at the tournament to the Countess Reginhild, but as I did not know thy name, I only called thee 'the lily.' "

"The lily!" repeated the brothers, thinking how well the epithet suited Oda's appearance.

"Art thou journeying, mistress?" inquired Albrecht.

"I was on the way to the abbess of Quedlinburg," said Oda, gradually recovering confidence, "when I met the knight, and —"

"To the abbess?" interrupted the count. "Then thou art doubly under my protection, for I am her champion, as thou perchance knowest."

"Who doth not know it, Count?" asked Oda, demurely.

"Is the abbess awaiting thee?"

"Yea, — I go to remain with her."

"To remain! Wouldst thou take the veil?"

"My brother bade me choose between the convent of Walbeck and that of Quedlinburg."

"Thy brother hath given thee only this choice," replied Albrecht, astonished. "Count Hoyer is childless, and thou art the heiress of the earldom of Falkenstein."

"I am the heiress," said Oda, "but — thou mayst as well know it, Count, for it cannot be kept secret much longer. My brother is about to make over the earldom to the bishop of Halberstadt."

"What sayest thou? To the bishop? Bernhard! dost thou hear that?" cried the count, beside himself with amazement and indignation. He had risen from his seat, and was striding backward and forward.

"Hast thou relinquished it of thine own free will?" he asked.

Oda shook her head, and sighed.

"Countess Oda," resumed Albrecht, after a short pause, "I will *not* release thee, after all! But I, Albrecht von

Regenstein, and all my brothers who stand here, will hold thee to thy rights. The bishop have the earldom of Falkenstein! Never, so long as I can wield a sword!"

All the brothers echoed his sentiments, loudly and resolutely.

"Now I thank thee for thy capture, Bock," the count went on. "Say to Ursula that she must prepare the chamber of our blessed mother for the Countess Oda."

"Hold! That is my affair!" cried Siegfried, joyfully, and hastened away to give his brother's orders.

So Countess Oda remained at Regenstein. Reginhild wished to take the young countess with her to Heimbург, instead of leaving her under the same roof with her unmarried brothers-in-law. But Albrecht declared that this unexpected turn of affairs might be of great consequence to him in his struggle with the bishop. The latter would doubtless use every means to get Oda into his power, in order to force her to give up her inheritance. She would be much safer within impregnable Regenstein than in the less strongly fortified Heimbург, and with her in his keeping he had some reason for disputing the earldom with the covetous bishop. And that would he do, come what might. The conflict with the prelate was unavoidable, and the sooner it came, the better.

Reginhild and her husband altogether agreed with him in this view of the matter, and the former, on Siegfried's account, also desisted from further remonstrance.

Count Albrecht allowed some days to elapse, until he thought his captive had become quite at her ease, before he sought a conversation with her, during which he learnt the following facts; that is, such of them as were not already known to him.

Oda's eldest brother had died childless, and thereupon the second Count Hoyer, who was then a canon in Hal-

berstadt, took the earldom, and married, but had no children. The superstitious devotee and still more his wife, Margaret, an austere, melancholy woman, considered their failure of issue as a chastisement from Heaven, to which they must bow; and Oda seemed almost to think that some secret crime weighed upon her brother's conscience, urging him to the cession of his estates to the church.

He had therefore resolved, for his soul's salvation, to relinquish his earldom to the church. He had thereupon offered it to the bishop, in consideration of an annuity and preferment in Halberstadt, and the latter had pressed him to make an immediate conveyance of it. This Count Hoyer refused, agreeing that the transfer should be made, however, upon his wife's death.

Nevertheless, Oda was not disposed to reproach her brother. He had always treated her kindly, and was unable to conceal his disinclination to disinherit her. But with his wife it was different. Margaret's cold nature continually repelled the young girl, who felt herself simply in the way of the loveless woman.

For this reason, Oda had not shed many tears at her departure from her father's castle, the lordly fortress of Falkenstein, which overlooked the green woods and meadows of the Selke valley, although she knew what she was leaving, and that she was leaving it forever. As a permanent abode she had chosen the free convent of Quedlinburg rather than that of Walbeck, so that she should not be forced to renounce the world absolutely.

It was in Count Albrecht's room, in the upper part of the castle, that this interview with Oda took place. The windows were glazed and it had a huge chimney, but was meagrely furnished. Albrecht sat in a large oaken arm-chair with a straight back, and opposite to him sat the Countess Oda. He had placed a shaggy bear-skin under

her feet, the only covering of the stone floor. The lime-washed walls were bare and unadorned; a rudely painted crucifix, with a withered branch stuck behind it, hung over the great oaken table, upon which stood an earthen-ware inkstand and a water-jug and drinking-cup. Besides these, a reed pen, some parchment, a pair of spurs, and a hunting-horn lay on the table, also a Saxon law book, which Count von Regenstein, as administrator of the law, must possess. An old shrine, a carved chest, and two wooden benches, upon which lay all sorts of hunting gear and weapons, completed the furniture. In the corner stood a long sword.

From the windows the count could look far and wide over the country, and could see the abbess's castle, toward which he often glanced, as if he felt bound, as Jutta's champion, to guard her with a watchful eye. Then her image would come before him in its seductive beauty, and drive away the recollection of her wilful caprices, which had so often vexed him.

It now occurred to him, as he talked with Oda, how strange it was that this young creature should be sitting opposite to him in his lonely castle, confiding to him her simple story, which aroused all his indignation anew. He promised the young countess to visit her brother immediately, and endeavor, if possible, to make him alter his purpose, though Oda shook her head hopelessly at the suggestion.

She had resigned herself to seek a new home at the castle of Quedlinburg, with its youthful abbess, and to forget her lost inheritance, and now suddenly all was changed. She had been carried to Regenstein as a captive of the all-powerful count, who nevertheless treated her with the tenderest consideration, and was even about to take steps for the recovery of her patrimony. It had

all seemed like a dream, and she had not been able to rid herself of a vague fear. But now, when she looked into Albrecht's honest eyes, and listened to his earnest voice, she felt a growing confidence in the man whom she had been wont to regard only with timorous admiration.

For she had met him two years before, at a great hunt at Falkenstein, when his noble figure and stately bearing made an indelible impression upon her. She had not seen him again until the occasion of the tournament at Ballenstedt, but she heard of him constantly, for his name was in every mouth. Some spoke of him with envy, some with fear, but all united in praise of his courage. He had been the hero of the tournament, the cynosure of a thousand eyes. Among this multitude, he, naturally, had not noticed Oda any more than at the hunt at Falkenstein, and for that reason he had not recognized the young countess when she was brought to him as his prisoner. And why should he? He, the great Count von Regenstein, and she, a maiden who had grown up in modest retirement, for whom no knight had ever broken lance!

And now she was his captive, perhaps for many a day, and she could not in her heart wish it otherwise. This was not an accident, nor was she the sport of destiny; it was the decree of fate, in which she silently acquiesced, tranquilly awaiting what the future held in store for her.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE appearance of Count Albrecht's room was very different indeed from that of his young guest. And this was owing to his brother Siegfried. Everything that the latter could find of furniture or decoration, in the unused rooms of the rambling castle, he had carried to Oda's chamber, with old Ursula's assistance, and in some cases in spite of her protestations. Thus the chamber gradually assumed a habitable appearance, though fitted up somewhat heterogeneously.

Carpets lay upon the floor, and faded tapestries were suspended from the walls. On a press, between two earthen vessels, stood a stuffed wood grouse and a carved image of the Virgin. Siegfried had procured some chairs covered with stamped leather, and embroidered footstools; he had hung upon the chimney a beautifully made suit of woman's armor, and stuck peacock's feathers all about the polished metal mirror which had been his mother's. Upon the table he placed a lute and an old yellow copy of "*Reinhart Fuchs*," by Heinrich dem Gliche-säre.

Oda smiled and Eilika laughed, when they saw these preparations for alleviating their imprisonment. They knew also whom they had to thank, for had they not seen Siegfried going hither and thither, his arms full of a strange medley of things, some of which, fortunately, there was no place for? But Oda was touched by his friendly zeal, and determined to thank the young knight.

One day Albrecht was obliged to ride over to his fortress of Botfeld, at Elbingerode, and Oda remained with

Siegfried. He asked her if she would not like to see the castle, as he would gladly show it to her. She accepted his proposal, and they proceeded to ascend the highest ledge of rocks, whence the whole fortress was seen to advantage.

The broad ridge of the hill, which was an enormous mass of rocks partly covered with trees, and falling off precipitously to the north and west, was like a gigantic stairway, every step of which had its own fortification, which, with the buildings attached to it, were partly constructed and partly hollowed out of the native stone. The most important part of the castle was hewn from the solid rock, and contained large halls and chambers, with walls of great thickness, and arched doors and windows.

The whole mass of buildings, with its ponderous construction, its towers, houses, gardens, and court-yards, appearing to Oda helplessly intricate, and therefore even greater and more fantastic than in reality it was, was surrounded by impregnable walls, to make the circuit of which required no little time.

Properly speaking, Regenstein was not so much a fortress as a collection of fortresses, which, in its size and strength, and the beauty and security of its position, was well-nigh unequalled.

Siegfried led Oda to the highest point of the dizzy precipice, holding her fast by the hand. "See, Countess Oda; the cliff is eight hundred feet high on this side," said he, "and if a man passeth by below, he looketh no larger than a rook. Within these walls we are safe from all assaults; nothing comes here that cannot fly."

Oda grasped Siegfried's hand more tightly, and looked down the sheer descent from the outermost wall.

"Now turn thy head," he continued. "Only there, toward Blankenburg, is it possible to scale the hill; but on

that side also the crags defend us, as well as solid walls, and the only passage hath double gates, beyond which is the drawbridge crossing the moat. That is the way thou camest hither. Hast thou ever seen a stronghold like this one?"

"Never!" exclaimed Oda, marvelling greatly at what she beheld.

"Dost thou not feel here secure and well guarded?"

"Truly," laughed she, "there is no chance to run away."

"Now, there," continued Siegfried, "against the rock, is what we call the upper castle, where we dwell with our guests; and those two windows, where the curtains are fluttering, are thine. There are the great hall, the armory, and stables. On the right, lower down, near the orchard, the soldiers and serving-men dwell, and hard by are the barns and storehouses. Yonder, on that naked crag, are small dwellings formed almost entirely of the solid rock. One of them is occupied by our trustiest follower, the Knight Bock von Schlanstedt, to whom we owe infinite thanks, Countess Oda. He hath chosen the cavern himself, and furnished it to suit his fancy. Rusty weapons, strange articles of plunder, and tender love-tokens are there preserved, as priceless treasures, and he hath some wonderful story to tell about each."

"Can one see them?" asked Oda.

"Thou wouldst make him proud, if thou shouldst visit him in his hermitage. But come now, Countess Oda, I will show thee the best of all."

"Let us linger here for a little," she pleaded, "and enjoy this scene."

The view from this point was certainly wonderful. They could see towns and villages, castles and citadels, the peaks of the nearer hills, and the distant mountain

chain, and she could not feast her eyes enough upon the magnificent picture.

"And how grand Regenstein itself looketh from all the points which we now see," Siegfried said, with pride. "From Ballenstedt, Quedlinburg Castle, Lauenburg, and from the Hartz hills yonder, its rocky mass standeth out alone, seeming to guard and govern the surrounding country."

Oda listened with interest, and it evidently gave the young knight much pleasure to point out and explain everything to her.

"What dost thou call this nearest hill, between us and Halberstadt?" asked she.

"That is the Hoppelberg," answered Siegfried. "Dost thou see the towers over there?"

Oda nodded.

"That is the bishop's fortress of Langenstein; no friendly neighbor of ours. The peak to the right is called the Helmet Rock. A good name for it, is it not?"

Oda nodded again, lost in admiration of the scene.

"And that is Heimburg, where thy brother Bernhard dwelleth?" she asked, presently. "Thou couldst almost beckon to him from here."

"In sooth we often do," answered Siegfried. "We greet each other with banners and pennons, and make preconcerted signals, which we readily understand."

"And directly behind is the Brocken. How imposing its great dome is! Oh! Count Siegfried, I had never imagined that the outlook from Regenstein was so beautiful!"

Siegfried's face beamed, and as they stood side by side for a while in silent enjoyment, a fresh breeze blew from the hill-tops, and played with his thick blond locks. White clouds sailed overhead, and threw their swiftly

moving shadows upon the fields far below, and the tender green of the oaks and birches. From the forest came the note of the jay, and in the quiet valley beneath sounded the bells of the Michaelstein monastery. Within the walls they could look down upon the serving-men and maids engaged in all sorts of work. It was a scene of busy activity, and gave an air of domesticity to the interior of this vast establishment, where nothing was intended to gratify the sense of beauty, but all was built for strength and durability.

"What is that sound of hammering that seemeth to come from within the rock?" asked Oda, listening.

"Follow me, Countess Oda, and I will show thee," said Siegfried.

They went up and down steps, and finally came to several rows of curious rock chambers, resembling a gigantic dove cote. They all had large openings for light and air, a low parapet in front, and seats hewn out of the stone, and sleeping-places and horses' cribs, many being connected by narrow passages. Perhaps these caverns dated back to the first settlement on the Regenstein, — "the rock of the Regino," that is, of the ruler or chief, — and had been inhabited by a wild race that far surpassed their descendants in strength and daring. Now, they served partly as prisons, partly as storehouses, and in time of war as places of shelter from foes encamped below. Out of one of these proceeded the sound of hammering, for it was used as a smithy, and the smiths were hard at work, while a fire burned on the hearth, under a chimney cut in the rock.

Oda was astonished at these concealed chambers, forming in themselves a fortress much more enduring than that which had been built artificially. The latter might some day disappear as it had appeared, through the agency of

human hands, but the other must endure as long as the world itself.

Siegfried and Oda seated themselves upon a window-ledge in one of these cool grottos commanding a view of the forest beneath, in which here and there could be seen open glades and glimpses of winding roads.

"Is it not a strange decree of fate, Countess Oda," began Siegfried, "that has brought thee here as the captive of one who once knelt at thy feet?"

"Thou art right," she answered. "I little foresaw it, when I placed the green wreath upon thy head."

"And I never knew thy name, but thine image was imprinted upon my memory. I should have known thee amongst a thousand, and often I would have ridden through the land seeking thee, had I followed my own heart."

"It made me happy, also," replied she.

"Truly?" he exclaimed, with a radiant face.

"Yea," she said, simply; "we maidens who sat together envied the princess who bestowed upon thy noble brother Albrecht the first prize. Then the herald came, and allowed us to cast lots to decide who should give the wreath to the victorious esquire, 'likewise a Regenstein,' said he. The lot fell upon me, and I was very proud of it."

"I have it still, Countess Oda."

"One should always preserve a tournament prize," she answered. "How many thy brother Albrecht must have!"

"Albrecht! truly he hath! But where canst thou find one who is able to ride or tilt like my brother! He is fit to sit at King Arthur's round-table!"

"I believe it, I believe it," said Oda, quickly. "Tell me about him, Count Siegfried; I know so little of all

he hath done, but what I *do* know is to his honor and glory."

"Oh! how rejoiced I am that thou lovest my brother! And, by all the saints, he deserveth it, Countess Oda!"

The girl was startled by his words, and her face became suffused with blushes. She looked down in silence.

"He is our shield and head," continued Siegfried, enthusiastically. "What were this stronghold without him? A desert rock! The horse that he rideth, the sword in his hand, seem to gain something of his spirit, and become a part of him!"

Oda looked at the speaker with glowing eyes.

"I think of all thy brothers thou bearest most resemblance to him."

"Dost thou indeed think so?" laughed he; and now it was his turn to redden. "Perchance in the face, but I shall never be such a man as he," he added, modestly.

"There I differ from thee, Count Siegfried," she replied, in a friendly tone. "Thou wilt win many another prize yet."

"If I could only receive them from thy hand!"

"When thou deservest one, and I have one to give, be sure that I will give it to thee!" she answered, smiling.

A red butterfly now flew in through the window opening, and fluttered about Oda's head.

"See!" said she, "a winged herald of the spring hath scaled your castle; against such ye are defenceless."

"It hath discovered the most beautiful flower that the spring hath brought us," he answered.

"Thou art a flatterer, Count Siegfried," laughed she, rising. "Such words ill suit these gray walls, and still less the ear of a poor captive."

"Which of us is the captive?" he asked, without moving. But she had walked on a few steps, and made no answer.

“Stay!” he cried, and sprang up. “Let me go before thee; the descent is steep and difficult.”

She allowed him to precede her, and followed him down the steps, with her hand resting on his shoulder. With delight he felt the soft pressure. At the foot they came to the dark opening of a shaft, which seemed to lead into the heart of the rock. As Oda noticed the subterranean passage, Siegfried observed, —

“It is almost filled up, and we never use it. It is called the Knights-templars’ dungeon, and — I cannot tell thee why.”

He knew well, but he did not wish to tell her, and she asked no questions.

“Now I will show thee my birds,” said he; “and thou shalt see the side of Regenstein which is least invincible, that thou mayst know how safe thou art here in case they should, perchance, try to take thee away from us by force.”

“I promise thee not to go if I can help it,” she answered, with a playful glance.

He led her over green turf and through shrubbery, and her astonishment increased as she saw the vast extent of the fortress, and beheld the moss and ivy covered rocks, walls, and towers which made the approach, even on the weakest side, so difficult.

“This is my falconry,” said he, when they finally came to the bird-house, with a space in front of it enclosed by a wire netting, where the birds were; “would it give thee pleasure to go out hawking with me?”

“Great pleasure, Count Siegfried!”

“Good! we will go immediately!”

A cheerful blast of the warder’s horn now sounded.

“Albrecht hath returned!” cried Siegfried. “Shall we go to meet him?”

Oda nodded assent, and they hastened to the gate, where they arrived just as Count Albrecht, on horseback, emerged from the dark archway. He dismounted, patted his horse, and said, "Go, Brauner; thou knowest thy way!" and the beast went quietly to the stables.

Albrecht looked at the two blooming young faces before him with evident pleasure.

"What are ye doing here?" he asked.

"I have been showing our captive her prison," replied Siegfried, reddening.

"Art thou contented with thy jailer, Countess Oda?" laughed Albrecht.

"Thou couldst not have given me a kinder one, Sir Count," she answered, with a friendly glance at Siegfried, which he returned.

Albrecht saw it, and smiled to himself, as they followed him to the upper castle.

A happy thought flashed across his mind: Siegfried and Oda! Both united for life, and the earldom of Falkenstein added to the Regenstein territory! And before he went to sleep that night, the thought had ripened into a settled purpose.

CHAPTER IX.

AT Regensteiu there was now a constant going and coming of mounted messengers. Count Albrecht wrote to the bishop in the most forcible terms, stating that under no circumstances would he suffer the annexation of Falkenstein to the Episcopal See, and if necessary he would have recourse to arms, to secure to the rightful heiress, now under his protection, her inheritance. He wrote also to the counts of Mansfeld, Hohnstein, and Stolberg, requesting them to withstand the grasping encroachments of the bishop. As to the counts of Blankenburg and Wernigerode, he feared, on account of their jealousy toward the Regensteins, that their help could not be counted upon. But the friendly nobles of the Hartz country declared themselves altogether of Albrecht's mind, assured him of their assistance in case of war, and promised to advance, with all their men-at-arms, so soon as they should receive a summons.

Albrecht's brother, Bernhard, himself rode to Falkenstein, to remonstrate with Count Hoyer.

Oda's capture was quickly known everywhere, and Albrecht's foes, especially the town-folk, raised a great hue and cry. Exaggerated versions of the affair were spread throughout the town. How she had been decoyed, of course, by "The Wicked Seven," and overpowered, with her armed followers, just outside the walls of Quedlinburg, which now must suffer for the misdoing committed within her borders, for the Falkensteins would doubtless declare war against their feudal protector — a fine protector, this robber count!

Count Hoyer, to whom the two soldiers had related the news of Oda's capture, had regarded it merely as the blunder of a retainer, which Count Albrecht would immediately rectify and suitably apologize for. He took it for granted that Bernhard had come for that purpose. But when he discovered his error and that his sister was still in durance, it seemed as though he would throw his visitor into prison in return. Bernhard thereupon related how Oda, whom only a fortunate accident had thrown into their hands, was entertained at Regenstein, and that she was allowed the greatest possible freedom, being detained simply to protect her from the bishop; thereupon he became calmer, and declared that he was in no haste to relinquish the earldom, and had no intention of yielding to the bishop's importunities.

It was impossible to obtain any further information from him, least of all to persuade him to make a binding promise that he would give up his design. He urged against it his plighted word to the bishop, and his own and his wife's earnest desire to give the land to the church, adding that he would not permit himself to be influenced by any consideration for his sister. At the same time he demanded her immediate release. This Count Bernhard promptly refused, and resolutely asserted that the Regensteins would never suffer the cession of Falkenstein to the bishop. So they parted, mutually exasperated, and Bernhard returned home, having accomplished nothing.

The answer of the bishop was all the more eagerly expected; but when it came, it contained not one word of reference to the earldom. Instead, the bishop accused the count of forcible abduction, and threatened him with excommunication if he did not at once set free Countess Oda von Falkenstein.

Albrecht laughed aloud. This was an unlooked-for move on the part of the bishop.

"'T is a pity, Master Rudolf," said he to the bishop's emissary, "that I cannot show thee the maiden in her dungeon, but she hath ridden out hawking with my brother Siegfried."

"The reverend bishop, my gracious master, requireth thy knightly word, Sir Count, that thou wilt release the Countess Oda, without delay."

"Requireth! Who hath a right to require anything of me?" retorted the count. "Am *I* the bishop's vassal, as thou art? Mayhap I ought to deliver the maiden over to thee, that thou mayst convey her to the bishop, to be shut up in some Ursuline convent. That would suit him best of all."

"She would surely be safer so," answered Dorstadt. "Tell me, Sir Count, for what object thou detainest the maiden?"

"That question no priest's hireling has a right to ask," cried Albrecht, angrily.

"Sir Count, I am the bishop's envoy," retorted Dorstadt, nearly bursting with rage.

"And if thou wert the devil's envoy —! But why do I bandy words with thee?" said the count, scornfully. "Ah! there they come!"

The count stood in the upper court-yard with the bishop's messenger as Siegfried and Oda came riding up, followed by the falconer, bearing a hooded falcon on his wrist, while a dead bird hung from the saddle. As she dismounted and came toward him, the count said, —

"I beg thee, Countess Oda, to say to Master Rudolf von Dorstadt whether thou art detained here as my prisoner, or remainest willingly as my guest."

Oda looked wondering first at the count and then at the knight, and finally said, "I am greatly indebted to Count Albrecht for his friendly hospitality."

"Note that down, Sir Knight, if thou canst write," remarked the count, scoffingly.

But Dorstadt spoke in a resolute tone to Oda, "The worthy bishop of Halberstadt commandeth thy departure from Regeustein, or Count Albrecht receiveth the ban of the church."

"The ban!" cried Oda, in dismay, "on my account. Then I must go; let me go, Sir Count! To-morrow morning early; nay, to-day; I might go to-day."

"Nay, nay!" exclaimed Siegfried.

Albert beckoned to him to be silent. "Now, I insist upon thy remaining, Countess Oda," said he, sternly.

"And now I see why he wisheth it," added Dorstadt, in a mocking tone.

Count Albrecht was about to put his hand on his dagger, but restraining himself, he cried out, "Insolent fellow, if I do not speedily see thy horse's tail, thou shalt not pass over the drawbridge alive!"

The knight turned and sprang into the saddle. "I can well believe it of thee!" he muttered, as he rode away.

Oda had greatly enjoyed her ride with Siegfried. She was a skilful horsewoman, and they galloped merrily on together over the meadows, chasing the deer which lay hidden among the reeds of the Michaelstein lake, and which the hounds aroused. Siegfried was radiant with joy by the side of his beloved, and his heart expanded like the spring flowers. Birds carolled among the blossoming trees, and the two young hearts beat high with youthful hope and pleasure. But when they met Albrecht with the Knight von Dorstadt, on returning home, and heard the bishop's demand and threat, it was as if they were suddenly plunged into cold water: one was rudely awakened from his blissful dream; the other, filled with anxiety and distress.

Albrecht's response was a consolation to Siegfried, for he knew his brother well enough to feel sure that he would not yield to the bishop's threats. But the latter might take further steps, or unforeseen events might occur to make Oda's stay at Regenstein impossible. He reflected, therefore, whether he had not better confess his love to Oda, lest some day she should be torn from him without knowing that he loved her. On the other hand, how would she take his avowal? She treated him with almost sisterly familiarity, and he could not discover in her behavior to him the slightest sign of maidenly love. So he locked up his secret within his own breast for the present, and waited and hoped.

As for Count Albrecht, his eyes would often rest in admiration upon Oda's slender figure, contrasting so well with Siegfried's manly strength. Her beautiful face, with its delicate color, and the soft, soulful eyes, had an irresistible charm; her every movement combined grace and dignity, and to the young girl's shyness was added much self-possession.

All this Albrecht was glad to see, and when he perceived how his youngest brother — not an adept in the art of dissimulation — felt toward Oda, the discovery gave him great satisfaction. Siegfried, indeed, had come to meet him half-way, as if to help him in the execution of his plan of making the two happy in marriage.

Oda sat the whole of the afternoon in her chamber, grieving over the danger which threatened Count Albrecht, and which could only be averted by yielding to the bishop's demand. During her nearly sleepless night, she determined to beg Count Albrecht to send her at once to the abbess. Thus she did timidly the next morning. The count looked at her with surprise, and at the same time so kindly, that she could say no more, and despite herself her heart began to beat faster than was its wont.

"My dear child," said he, gently, "art thou troubled about me on account of the threatened ban?"

Oda trembled; she stood before him, embarrassed, without being able to utter a word.

"Do not distress thyself, Countess Oda," he continued, soothingly; "the bishop's ban will afflict me little, even should he dare to pronounce it. I will not detain thee by force, but the threat of excommunication is no reason for releasing thee. The bishop only wanteth thy inheritance, and will strain every nerve to get possession of thee, that he may force thee to renounce it. And then think," he added, smiling, "what a long face Siegfried would wear, if I let thee go."

The girl opened her blue eyes, as though she did not understand him, and then asked, simply, "Dost thou wish me to stay, Sir Count?"

He held out his hand, and said, fervently, "Yea, Countess Oda! I do wish it; I wish it most heartily!"

"I remain then!" she cried, quickly, and her words sounded like a suppressed cry of joy. With a slight pressure of his hand she left the room, confused and blushing.

Count Albrecht stood gazing thoughtfully at the door, through which she had so quickly disappeared. A deep sigh escaped him. "Nonsense!" he exclaimed, shaking his head, and turning away hastily.

At that moment Schadow, his squire, entered and announced, "The scrivener, from the castle!"

Albrecht made a quick movement, but beckoned to the man to show him up. "She hath sent for me," he said to himself, with a smile. "Welcome, Florencius! Darest thou trust thyself in the hands of the robber count?"

"Oh! Sir Count," answered the new-comer, with a deep bow, "I could not feel safer in Abraham's bosom."

"Clever fellow!" laughed the count; "thou hast al-

ways a shrewd word to say at the right time. What bringest thou, brave Florencius, — an angry epistle?"

"Nay; only a thousand greetings from our gracious lady."

"And that I must come. Is it not so?"

"Yea, Sir Count; the message was to that effect. It hath been repeated to me more than once," replied Florencius.

"Spare me the litany. I will take it for granted," answered Albrecht. "What doth my lady wish?"

"Thee, and the Countess Oda von Falkenstein."

"Naturally! Well, she may have me, but not the countess."

"No! In that case I am to ask, why not?"

"That will I tell the abbess myself."

"So much the better! So will she be best suited. But—"

"But! But what?"

"I must see thy prisoner, Sir Count."

"Oho! thou knave! Is that part of thy charge, or only thine own idle curiosity?" asked Count Albrecht.

Florencius laughed. "That I am not authorized to tell thee, Sir Count. I was to see for myself if she be young and beautiful, but with caution and secrecy."

It was now Albrecht's turn to laugh. "By my soul! Thy mistress hath chosen a crafty spy! Tell her that the captive is young and beautiful, and that our rock hath never yet sheltered such a lily."

"High praise from thy mouth, Sir Count!"

"But not high enough, Florencius! Thou shalt be our guest to-day, and see her at the mid-day meal. In the afternoon thou canst ride back to thy mistress and tell her what thou hast with great secrecy discovered. And I will come myself, ere long."

"But I was also bidden to invite the countess to the castle," said Florencius. "The abbess awaits her arrival."

"Invite her? Since when hath it been the fashion to give invitations to prisoners?"

"Wilt thou in sooth not let her go, then, Sir Count?"

"Nay," laughed the count; "in sooth I will not let her go. Now I will pray thee to leave me; I will meet thee again at the board."

Florencius left the room, and went in search of the knight, Bock von Schlanstedt.

"They are all striving to take the sweet maiden from me!" said Albrecht to himself, when he was again alone. He walked to the window, and looked toward the castle of Quedlinburg. "Be not disturbed, Jutta! The white lily cannot be dangerous to the red rose!"

CHAPTER X.

THE following morning brought a new surprise to Count Albrecht. A letter came from the counts of Berthold and Rudolf of Blankenburg, protesting against Albrecht's assumption of the domain and castle of Gersdorf, under the pretext that it had been promised to them by the Prince of Ballenstedt many months before. They were, nevertheless, prepared to renounce their claim, if Count Albrecht would solemnly agree to aid them in acquiring Lauenburg, in regard to which they had been in treaty with the abbess of Quedlinburg for a long time. Otherwise, they were ready to declare war against him. Beside the signatures of both the counts of Blankenburg, the document was also signed by the counts Walther and Konrad von Wernigerode and the knights Johann von Romersleben, Heinrich von Hakeborn, Hans von Kreiendorf, Werner von Hadmersleben, and Gerhard von Zilly.

"Ha!" cried Count Albrecht to Siegfried, as he read; "the signal for the hunt hath been given, and the bishop hath let loose the hounds. Ride over to Bernhard, and take him this letter. Say to him privately that I know of but one answer to it. In eight days Lauenburg must be ours, and he shall occupy it. I will ride to Quedlinburg, and thence to Gersdorf, in order to inform Günther. Heed well what Bernhard adviseth."

"Oh! he will not advise against it," answered the youth, much stirred at the prospect of the coming struggle.

"Take Countess Oda with thee to visit Reginhild," Albrecht went on. "Tranquillize her as well as thou canst; seek to win her favor. Thou must be her friend and consoler, Siegfried. It is my wish."

Siegfried stood before his brother with downcast eyes, as though he were receiving rebuke, and in the tone of one who says, "I will mend my ways," he replied, —

"I will do my best."

"Good!" said Albrecht. "Now order Schadow to saddle my horse, and tell him he is to ride with me, and send Bock hither. I wish to talk with him."

Siegfried went to execute his brother's behest, and Albrecht put on his coat of mail, which he had no sooner done than Bock made his appearance.

"Rejoice, Bock!" cried the count; "thou wilt soon have thy fill of hacking and slashing."

Bock's eyes sparkled.

"When? Where? Against whom, Sir Count?"

"The bishop of Halberstadt, and the Blankenburgs, the Wernigerodes and others will soon take the field against us. Now listen closely to what I say to thee."

Bock bent forward, and fixed his piercing eyes upon his master. He looked like a hawk about to swoop down upon its prey.

"Let thy six bloodhounds loose," directed the count, "and hunt up that old fox, Schabernack, and find out from him what the bishop's designs are. If he knoweth nothing, let him discover if the bishop hath on foot an expedition into Swabia, and speedily inform us, and of what is occurring in Halberstadt, as well."

"It shall be done, master; but we must wet his throat and fill his purse."

"Promise him a rich guerdon, Bock, for we must needs have certain knowledge at the right time."

"I would rather go alone, and speak with the old devil's spawn myself," answered the knight. "He shall not make *me* believe a stork's nest to be a horse's crib."

"Do so," said the count, "but not to-day, for I must go forth, and Siegfried likewise. Let two of thy comrades lie in ambush on the road between Blankenburg and Wernigerode, and keep their eyes and ears open. The others may rove about Halberstadt and Wegeleben. Give instructions in Schwanebeck, Harlseben, and Derenburg to waylay travellers who are not of our faction, and examine their papers. Those who resist—"

"They shall be provided for."

"Do what is necessary, but spare the poor peasants. Thou shalt not harass and importune them. Thou understandest that, Bock."

"Yea, my lord."

"Bock, we must be up early, and keep the bow strung and the lance in rest. Our enemies are bestirring themselves; we must vanquish one after another. And I will confide to thee, Bock, that in the first place we must obtain Lauenburg."

"Ha! Lauenburg! That hath had so many suitors already!"

"Certainly; and therefore I must press *my* suit, and capture it at once!"

"Yea, Sir Count; and I must be with thee."

"Thou shalt. And now thou knowest all. See that thy brave company is up and doing."

"Master, rely upon me!" and the knight hastened away with long strides. Schadow stood outside, with two horses saddled and bridled. "The count will be with thee speedily!" Bock called out to him. Schadow merely nodded. The doughty squire only spoke when it was

necessary, and then in the briefest manner. When his master appeared, he held the stirrup for him, and they rode away together.

To Bock von Schlanstedt the bright sunny day seemed a trifle tedious. After his comrades had departed, he seated himself on a bench in the shadow of the stables, crossed his long, thin legs, and pondered on what his master had said to him. But strange to tell, much as the bold swaggerer had revelled in warfare since he first took his life in his hands, to-day his thoughts were continually straying away from its details, and taking an altogether different turn.

It was one of his weaknesses to imagine that he understood women thoroughly, and could make himself dangerous to the feminine heart. He could not recover from his chagrin at having been deceived, and confusing mistress with maid, when he brought the countess to Regenstein. He felt that he had disgraced himself, and was in a difficult position with regard to both one and the other. As regards the countess, he considered that he had added insult to injury by his mistake, and kept out of her way as much as possible, seeking to make atonement by his solemn and subservient manner, without suspecting the amusement it caused.

He was no less mortified in the presence of the maid, though for a different reason. It piqued him to think that he had rendered her homage, as though she were a high-born damsel, — the saucy maid, who had undertaken to play the lady from Quedlinburg to Regenstein, and by making him fall into her trap, had disgraced him in his own eyes. He determined to be revenged upon her for this imposition, and to make her realize, by his severe and yet patronizing behavior, their respective positions.

Elika understood his motive, and indulged in playful

skirmishing with the offended knight, who never gave her, in return for her keenest thrusts, a rude retort, however hot he might be. He usually got the worst of it, however, and was obliged to retire in confusion.

But these little combats were not without result. The knight's inflammable heart caught fire, and one morning Bock awoke, head over ears in love with the pretty maid. He was quite angry with himself at the discovery, and instead of making known his feelings, he endeavored to carefully conceal them, without choosing the best means of doing so, namely, by avoiding her. On the contrary, he followed her more persistently than ever, and Eilika failed not to note his infatuation.

The cunning maiden, no longer very young, but somewhat spoilt, who thought the old housekeeper too sedate, and the castle servants too much beneath her for familiar intercourse, was strongly tempted to lead the love-lorn knight by the nose for the sake of pastime.

When she saw him sitting by himself on the stone bench, she came out, and accepting his polite invitation, took a seat beside him.

"It is lonely here to-day," she began. "If I were not under thy protection, Sir Knight, I should really feel afraid; in fact, without thee I should be ready to run away."

Bock was much flattered by this speech. He sat bolt upright, and said, with a complaisant smile, "Fear nothing, mistress! I will defend thee from danger; and if thou shouldst run away, I will run after thee."

"Ah! Sir Knight!" sighed Eilika, "my heart is heavy when I think of the future. What is to become of us, Countess Oda and myself? We cannot always remain at Regenstein."

"Why not?" answered Bock, with animation; "what

do ye lack here? Ye have each a knight, who is ready at any moment to shed his blood for ye."

Eilika bit her lips, to avoid laughing. "Heaven forbid, Sir Knight!" she exclaimed. "I can never bear the sight of blood."

"It is not necessary that thou shouldst see it," replied Bock; "a brave knight doth not summon his lady-love, when he breaketh a lance for her."

"I have heard," said Eilika, "that the bishop requireth thy master to yield us up to him. Then we shall be put into a convent, and forced to take the veil. Alas! we love the world and our fellow-men so dearly, Sir Knight!" chirped the maid, with a glance that might have melted the iron links in Bock's shirt of mail.

"Gentle maiden!" cried he, warmly, "how canst thou disturb thyself with such a frightful thought? We will give ye up to no one. Bock von Schlanstedt will never suffer thee to become a nun!"

"How wilt thou hinder it?" asked Eilika, with a side-long glance at the knight.

It was certainly a dangerous question, to which there was a very natural answer. But Bock's imagination had never carried him quite as far as that. He was almost frightened at Eilika's sudden query, and at the possibility of his roving, rollicking life being changed to one of domestic monotony.

"Hinder," he repeated, in visible embarrassment, while he stroked his long mustache. "Oh! there are many ways. Dost thou not see how my young master, Count Siegfried, admireth thy gracious mistress? I believe he loveth her and she him, and when they are wedded, I shall still remain with them, and thou canst likewise stay with his lady, and — and then thou needest not become a nun."

“ Ah ! a fine plan ! ” laughed Eilika.

“ Is it not ? ” said Bock, proud of his shrewdness. “ But I fear me they are both too shy to speak. What if we should strive to help them a little, so as to bring them together the sooner ? ”

“ H'm ! How wouldst thou begin ? ”

“ Oh ! I will leave that to thee, ” he answered. “ There is ten times more wit under a woman's head-gear than under a steel morion. Thou surely wishest thy mistress happiness, as I do my dear young master ; bethink thyself if there is not some way by which we can help them. ”

Eilika nodded, and sat for a while in thoughtful silence, while Bock waited patiently for the result of her meditations. But he was altogether mistaken as to their purport ; Eilika's thoughts had wandered another way.

She had prepared herself for a declaration of love from the knight, and perchance for scornful toleration on her side, though she might not have immediately spoken a decided no, but have asked for time, and so kept him in suspense. But now he had drawn back directly, seeming to regard her question as a sort of challenge. If this were the case, she had unmasked herself, and felt almost as if *she* were the rejected one. His plan for helping to unite Siegfried and Oda was welcome to her, as well as his proposal that she should remain with the latter, for she sincerely loved her mistress ; but when he said, “ And I shall remain with my young master, ” he should have added, “ and then would I marry thee, ” but not one word more came from him ! What did this Bock desire ? Did he intend to hang about her, without any serious purpose ? She would soon put a stop to that !

“ Sir Knight, ” she said, finally, “ thy proposition is not amiss ; I will think of it, and gather meanwhile a bunch

of wild flowers for my mistress, for I know how she loveth them."

"And I will help thee to find them," rejoined Bock.

"I do not need thy help," she retorted. "Thou knowest how to handle horses, but handling flowers is a different thing!"

"Fair and softly!" cried Bock, not pleased by Eilika's tone; "it would not be the first nosegay I have handled."

"It maketh a difference for whom the flowers are plucked," said she, turning up her nose.

"If thou wilt permit me to pluck them for thee, I will show thee —"

"Spare thyself the trouble; thou wouldst earn small thanks," replied she, maliciously.

"I deem trouble always worth thanks," said he, wondering at the abrupt change in her manner.

"Dost thou? I do not agree with thee. Officiousness never deserveth thanks."

"A nettle beginneth to sting young," he retorted, fairly aroused.

"Then keep away from the nettle," suiting the action to the word, and moving to the other end of the bench.

"What hath come over thee, that thou shouldst suddenly be so unkind?" asked Bock.

"Unkind? Suddenly? I know not that I have ever been kind. I would, however, save thee from being stung by nettles."

"Too much wit and wisdom may sometimes prove worse than folly," he answered.

"So much the better for thee," laughed she, "for thou art not overburdened with the former commodities!"

"Hast thou made that discovery already?"

"Yes," she answered, boldly, "on the first day of our acquaintance, when thou didst ride beside me, and called me 'gracious lady.'"

Whereupon he answered, angrily, "Ye were both clothed from head to foot in travelling gear, with veils over your faces; how should I discern the difference between mistress and maid?"

"I am not her maid," she said.

"Not her maid? What, then?"

"That is hard to explain to thee, who hast been brought up among the peasant wenches of thy native village."

She had now touched a sore spot, and he could not forgive her. He rose, and his angular face assumed a forbidding expression.

"Thou hast thyself reminded me that I am in command here to-day. I will, therefore, show my care for thee. The spring sun may tan thy white skin; for that reason, go up quickly to thy chamber and bide there till thy mistress returneth."

What! Had she heard him rightly? He meant to imprison her? "Sir Bock von Schlanstedt!" she cried, springing to her feet, "I hope —"

But he cut her short, adding, with a piercing glance, "Should it not please thee to stay in thy chamber, I know many cooler places," pointing to the caves in the rock, and bade her good morning.

Was it possible? Dared he do it? But she was, after all, a captive in the fortress of the robber count, and in the power of his lieutenant. Pale and trembling, she went to her room, speechless with rage.

Bock looked after her grimly, and muttered to himself, "I will tame thee yet, disdainful maiden!"

CHAPTER XI.

IN the mean time Count Albrecht rode to Quedlinburg, his faithful servant, Schadow, trotting a short distance behind. As they passed over the tournament field, and saw the strongly fortified town lying before them, Albrecht's face darkened. He begrudged the burghers their rapidly growing power, and the consciousness of it, which made them proud and refractory, no longer relying upon their patrons, whose influence upon the government of the city they endeavored continually to lessen.

Consequently, he did not pass the lofty gate, where he knew he would receive but a churlish greeting from the guard, but turned to the right, and rode around the Münzenburg, and from that side to the Königsburg.

When he had mounted the steps within the castle, in the passageway leading to the apartment of the abbess, he met the superior, Kunigunde, whose encounter with Albrecht was by no means accidental, for she had spied him in the distance, and had been lying in wait for him.

"Ah!" cried she, feigning surprise, "Count Albrecht, is it thou! So thou hast come at last! We have been dying to see thee!"

"So I thought," he replied, smiling, "and therefore I have come."

"Bringest thou thy fair prisoner with thee! Where is she, then?" asked Kunigunde.

"Bound and well guarded, in a dark dungeon."

"What a mocker thou art, Count!" she said, with a smile which traced a thousand wrinkles in her faded face.

They had reached the door of an anteroom, which

Albrecht was about to open, when the superior remarked, "Now we shall hear what our dear lady hath to say to thy detention of one of her flock."

"I will request her to send for thee," he answered, "so soon as thy counsel is needed." And with a low bow he slipped through the door, which he closed quickly behind him.

She stood for a moment confused, cheated out of the gratification of her curiosity.

"Bear!" she muttered, with a wrathful face, and hastened to the deaconess, to pour her vexation into her friend's sympathizing ear.

"My welcome here will be a scant one," thought Count Albrecht, while he was being announced to the abbess.

Certainly she did not come to him so quickly as on the last occasion. "One must bid thee come, Count, if one wisheth to see thee," she said in a somewhat cool tone, to which her bright eyes seemed yet to give the lie.

"Gracious lady," answered he, "I have not been sitting with the monks, angling in the Michaelstein fish-pond."

"I conjecture what hath kept thee away, Count," remarked the abbess, motioning him to take a seat. "Thou comest not alone?"

"Nay, my lady; my Schadow hath accompanied me," he replied, seating himself.

"Thy *shadow*? Yea, that I see," said she.

"Nay, gracious lady, he is below in the court-yard, holding the horses."

The abbess looked at him, puzzled.

"My servant's name is Schadow," he continued, with a smile. "Otherwise I come alone."

"Thou bringest not the countess with thee?"

"Nay, gracious lady."

"Count Albrecht," said the abbess, "this is altogether

a new manner of acting the part of protector. Are maidens in the future to first serve their novitiate at thy castle, before they are admitted into our chapter?"

"I had not thought of that, my lady, but it would be a good idea. It is very lonely in the castle without a companionable woman."

"Sayest thou so, Count? Is not this a new sentiment on thy part? It would not be difficult to supply the lack of companionship at the Regenstein in the pleasantest manner possible."

She reddened, as she uttered these words, and her eyes sparkled.

"In sooth!" he replied, lightly, "and now the lack is supplied"

"But by what means! By force and craft, justice and right notwithstanding; though, perhaps, it is companionship under such circumstances which thou desirest?" she said, defiantly.

"I did not seek her," answered the count. "Bock von Schlanstedt brought me the Countess Oda, because she happened accidentally to come across his path rather than another."

"Accidentally? Without thy command? How can I believe that?"

"I chided him well, when he brought her to my castle."

"Notwithstanding which, thou keepest her there."

"From pity for the maiden."

"From pity!" repeated the abbess, with a mocking smile.

"And because I intend to hold her as a hostage against the shameful designs of her brother and in despite of the bishop, to whom I grudge the beautiful countess," answered Albrecht, becoming impatient at this prolonged interrogation.

"And hast thou no more reasons to allege?" scoffed the abbess. "Let me ask thee, Sir Count, by what right thou refuseth her to me also, to whose protection she hath been confided by her brother?"

"Because she is safer at the Regenstein with me than she would be here," he answered, resolutely.

"Safer?" she repeated, her sarcastic smile returning, "thou meanest — nearer to thee!"

Count Albrecht frowned.

"And the poor maiden remaineth willingly with thee?" asked Jutta, with a watchful glance.

"I trust so, my gracious lady," said Albrecht, looking firmly at the abbess. Her scornful tone and suspicious words irritated him to that degree that he had difficulty in re-training himself.

"I can well believe it! Why should she not? Thou art such an anxious guardian of thy accidental charge."

"I understand my duties as host, my lady."

"Truly," she returned, with hot cheeks. "And I am told by the convent scrivener that your young countess is beautiful. Thou hast said so, indeed; thou thinkest thyself that no such lily hath ever bloomed upon thy rocks. I am sure I wish thee joy of her, Count von Regenstein!"

Thereupon Albrecht rose quickly from his seat, pushed it back, and cried, in a loud tone, "My lady, forget not to whom and of whom thou speakest. Why shouldst thou trouble thyself about my actions? Am I a choir-boy, who is rebuked because he singeth falsely? I have come hither, not to justify myself, but to unfold to thee my reasons for detaining the Countess von Falkenstein. Moreover, I am lord in my own castle, and whom I would keep there, I keep, despite thee and the bishop! With one word I could disarm thy suspicions, cared I to take the trouble to speak that word!"

He turned from her, and strode angrily up and down.

The abbess recoiled before his gusty wrath and his flashing glances. Pale and trembling, she sought support by leaning upon the table. And yet this outbreak of masterful temper filled her with a sort of joy, notwithstanding her fears.

"Speak that word, Count Albrecht!" she urged.

"It is a secret," he replied, "and is nothing more than the earnest desire of my heart. I will disclose it to thee, my lady, but I trust thou wilt not abuse my confidence."

She listened expectant as he approached nearer, and said, "I cherish a secret hope that the Countess Oda will wed my brother Siegfried."

"Ah!" ejaculated Jutta; and this was all she said, but it came from the depths of her heart, while a smile lit up her face. She made an effort to regain her self-possession, and conceal the true cause of her anxiety as well as her sense of relief. The count must, at least, have suspected her of jealousy, and she said to herself that he was magnanimous to act as if he perceived nothing. Perchance he already understood her feelings. It might well be, for in his presence she was only too apt to lose self-control.

But if he knew what she could not conceal, why did he not consider himself fortunate, did he not feel proud to be loved by such a one as she? She knew that her rank and beauty entitled her to stand side by side with any Von Regenstein, and why should not she and Albrecht make such another pair as were Siegfried, the dragon-slayer, and his Brunhild.

She wished now to recover the appearance, at least, of maidenly reserve; so, summoning all her dignity, she said, "Forgive me, Count Albrecht! Had I been aware of thy desires and hopes regarding the Countess Oda and thy

brother, I should have understood and approved, but the countess was sent to me to be an inmate of this convent; therefore, I feel myself responsible for her, and as abbess, considered myself obliged to require her presence here. Now, the case is different, and we can easily come to an understanding."

"If thou didst only know my Siegfried!" answered the count.

"Oh, I know him!" interrupted the abbess, while she again seated herself, and invited Albrecht to do likewise.

"Thou hast seen him twice, but thou dost not know him as I do," said the count, "who desire for him the happiness which I have never had myself, and perchance never will have. Thou knowest that in the last years of my dear father's life, — God rest his soul! — the weight of the earldom lay more upon my shoulders than upon his. He sent me hither and thither upon weighty business; my youth was soon over, and my head so filled with engrossing matters that the heart's rights were lost sight of. And since his death, as the oldest of us six Regensteins, all the weight of affairs rests upon me. When do I have rest or peace? One conflict is hardly over, before I am driven into another; with foes everywhere, I must be as watchful as a warder in his tower; always in harness, always in the saddle, always in danger, I must think for all, and act for all; in short, do everything but rest and dream. And yet, I would not have it otherwise. I am used to the life! A knight and a soldier must I remain, helping others whenever possible, while yet standing my own ground; and come weal or ill, my brothers' happiness is my first object.

As he spoke thus, Jutta's gaze was riveted upon him; while her ears drank in every word, and a happy, peaceful feeling stole over her. This, then, was the cause of his

silence, his delay, — he had no time for love. It seemed as if what he had said, he had said intentionally, to console her and to deprecate her impatience. She determined within herself that she would never be overbearing with him again, but strive to ameliorate his hard life by every means in her power, and adhere to him faithfully with quiet devotion, till better days should come.

She was silent for a time, after he ceased speaking, though she could not repress a look of gratitude for having revealed to her something of his inmost feelings.

Presently she inquired, in a tone of genuine sympathy, “Is there any prospect of this union taking place?”

The count shrugged his shoulders. “It is that which troubleth me. The young countess surroundeth herself with such observance of modesty and reserve, that while she winneth all hearts, she keepeth all at a distance.”

Modesty and reserve, which won all hearts! Was he thinking of her own bold and passionate nature?

“Is she, then, as exceedingly beautiful as Florencius declareth?” she asked.

“I can hardly call the pale lily exceedingly beautiful,” answered Albrecht, smiling; “but there is a gentle grace, an indescribable charm about her; every movement of her slender figure, the tone of her voice, and the earnestness of her clear blue eyes seem to inspire silent adoration.”

Jutta listened to this description with growing uneasiness. The bad spirit which had but just been exorcised, began again to assert itself. A maiden was only thus portrayed by one who — and this was the man who had no time for love!

“Art thou, then, so sure, Count Albrecht, that they love one another?”

“My brother’s ardent love for Oda is beyond all doubt, and he is untiring in his efforts to show it, by acts of knightly devotion. But I have no proof, as yet, that she returneth his love.”

“Perhaps another hath won her heart?”

Jutta asked this question with eagerness, turning a searching look upon the count.

“I know not, my lady, and I hope not,” he answered, fervently.

“She is thy captive, Count Albrecht. Wouldst thou oblige her to wed thy brother, if she — if thou shouldst find that she loveth another?”

“My lady! How canst thou ask such a question? To force the gentle maiden against her will! Never! But I know that true love, which lasteth for aye, is of slow growth, like the oak.”

“What dost *thou* know about it?” asked she.

Albrecht was silent, struck by her question, his own words suddenly appearing to him in a strange light.

“Count Albrecht! give me the countess! She is safer with me than with thee.”

Jutta spoke so imperiously, looking at him, moreover, with a half-anxious, half-threatening gaze, that he could not help distrusting her.

He shook his head, and said, slowly and resolutely, “Nay, my lady!”

“I will cherish her as one destined for thy brother,” urged Jutta. “I will consider her before all others, and fulfil every wish of her heart. Thou canst come here with thy brother as often as thou wishest, and Siegfried shall see Oda alone. They can converse as freely as we do, and no one shall interfere with them.”

The count again shook his head, without speaking.

“Thus Count Hoyer will be satisfied, and thou canst

arrange matters with him in peace and friendliness. The bishop will have no pretext for threatening thee, and I will do all in my power to secure to Oda her rightful inheritance, even if I have to appeal to the Emperor."

Jutta's cheeks flushed, and her voice slightly trembled.

"I thank thee, my lady; thy trouble would be useless; the quarrel must be settled with the sword, and I trust speedily and finally."

Jutta looked displeased, but tried to control herself.

"Consider, Sir Count; is it suitable that a maiden should sojourn at Regenstein, among all ye men? Here with us is the place for a high-born young gentlewoman. What canst thou say against that?"

"She hath her young waiting-woman with her," replied Albrecht.

"An excellent duenna, by my troth! And this satisfieth the noble maiden, with her modesty and reserve! But I had supposed a Countess of Falkenstein to have more sense of what is becoming than to tarry of her own choice in a lonely fortress, protected only by men against—I know not what, except unwelcome interference."

"And who hath told thee, my lady," cried the count, rising, "that she tarries of her own choice with men in a lonely fortress?"

"Ah!" cried Jutta, likewise rising; "so thou detainest her by force?—only from pity, from love for thy brother, and that thy brother may win a well-dowered bride. How I envy thy brother such a loyal ally! Thou canst answer nothing. Therefore, I say to thee again, let me have the countess, and let thy brother woo her here with all honor, or else what must I think? There is no reason for holding her!"

A stormy light gleamed in Count Albrecht's eyes.

“Think what thou wilt for me,” said he; “I shall do as I choose, and if it doth not please thee, my lady, I cannot help it. The Countess Oda cometh not here! And now I bid thee farewell, till thou art in a softer humor!” And with clanking steps he departed, swung himself into the saddle, and rode straightway to the castle of Gersdorf.

CHAPTER XII.

ALL the way to Gersdorf the vehement words of the abbess rang in Count Albrecht's ears, "Let me have the countess; there is no reason for holding her!"

No reason? Had he not given her reasons enough? Had he not said that Oda was safer at Regenstein than anywhere else? Yet, if fighting began between the Regensteins and the bishop's faction, no more unfavorable abode could be found for her, and he thought with anxiety of exposing the maiden to the terrors and dangers of war. She would assuredly be safer at the castle of Quedlinburg, under the protection of the princely abbess, who had promised to cherish her; for what Jutta promised, she performed.

But Siegfried! how would he fare without his beloved! Jutta's words promised well, but he and Oda could not be so untrammelled at the castle of Quedlinburg, under the eye of the abbess, as on the rocky heights of Regenstein, or in the solitude of the neighboring forest. He feared, likewise, that at the convent they would be no nearer the union which Albrecht so ardently desired for them.

And he himself! could *he* make up his mind to let Oda go? Her presence in the castle was like a continual, ever-renewed miracle, which the spring had brought as its most beautiful gift; or had she brought the spring, which, after the dreary winter, had never seemed so sweet and so sunny as now? Since the death of the mother, no chatelaine had lived at Regenstein, commanding respect from man and maid, such as a soldier, like Count Albrecht, does not require. He was satisfied if they did their duty

in fortress and field, and obeyed his behests ; for the rest, he was not exacting.

But now a noble maiden, nominally a prisoner, but treated as mistress, lived among them as if in her own home ; climbed to the summit of the rocks, where her slender figure might often be seen against the sky, or moved here and there like the good genius of the place, bringing peace and happiness to all.

And this guardian spirit Count Albrecht was required to banish ! Never ! Her voice sounded in his ear like the song of the wood-thrush, her morning greeting brightened the day, and when she withdrew at its close her good-night seemed like a benediction.

But he always thought of Oda and Siegfried together. They had become so united in his mind, that he could not think of them separately. He was sure that this marriage would bring happiness to both, and he desired it as much for the gentle girl who had so soon become endeared to him, as for his beloved Siegfried, whom he had seen grow from boyhood to manhood.

The interview with the abbess had irritated him, and it disquieted him still. Surely she suspected that he kept possession of the young countess on his own behalf ; that he loved her, and wished for her himself. He and Oda ! The pale lily as his wife ! What a wild and wondrous thought ! Such a possibility had never dawned upon him, even in his dreams, and surely never to the innocent girl ; only Jutta's fantastic jealousy could have originated such a conceit !

A greater contrast could not be imagined than that between these two women now under his protection. That Jutta von Kranichfeld loved him passionately he could not fail to see, and he was used to her caprices, which changed like the winds and waves ; a creature now all

warmth and sunshine, then on a sudden fierce and stormy ; her love, however, always shining, even through the clouds. Her impetuous nature half repelled, half attracted him. He would not be wooed and won ; he would do the wooing himself, whether it were a hostile citadel or a haughty beauty. Resistance allured him whenever he met it, but in this case it was he who resisted. And yet at times he was tempted to wed this proud creature, subdue her wayward will, and change her stormy passion to quiet constancy and self-forgetting love. The strong right hand, though used to wielding the sword, was surely capable of tender caresses, and the lips accustomed to command, could yet learn to please a lady's ear. Of what manner of woman should his wife be ? A submissive child, smoothing his brow with gentle hand, reading his thoughts in his eyes, and regarding his words as the highest earthly wisdom ; or one of a spirit to match his own, with independent mind and will ready to fight for him, if need be, and to stand by his side in every danger. Such a woman as this sat in the old imperial palace of Quedlinburg, only waiting for him to say, " Come ! "

Absorbed in his reflections, Count Albrecht reached the fortress of Gersdorf, and as the warder on the ramparts greeted him with a loud blast of the horn, his dreams of love flew away like frightened birds. He rapidly rehearsed in his mind what he had to say to Günther, and then it occurred to him that he had quite forgotten to speak to the abbess about Lauenburg. On his way to Quedlinburg he had determined to ask her to put him in possession of the stronghold, for he much preferred to hold it lawfully in fief, than to take it by force ; but he must have it, in any event, and there was danger in delay.

It was now too late to remedy his oversight. He could not return with his request to the abbess, after the inter-

view which had just taken place. Therefore he adhered to his first plan, of which he had informed Bernhard through Siegfried; namely, to storm the castle of Lauenburg.

He acquainted Günther with what had taken place at Regenstein, and gave him detailed instructions. The assault was to be made by the garrisons of Gersdorf and Gunteckenburg under Albrecht's command, a large force not being needed. Günther should be notified as to the time, and under cover of darkness would march with his followers to a certain point, where Albrecht agreed to meet him.

Günther promised faithfully to carry out his brother's orders. The latter again mounted his horse, and, accompanied by his silent squire, rode back to Regenstein as rapidly as possible. Siegfried had told Oda of the errand upon which he was bent, and proposed to her to walk with him to Heimburg, having the horses sent after them, so that they could ride back, to which Oda willingly agreed.

They accordingly set out, but she was silent and abstracted. She plucked a flower here and there as they walked, and answered her companion's remarks in a friendly but absent-minded manner. Finally she asked, arranging her flowers the while, —

“Where hath Count Albrecht ridden to-day?”

“To Quedlinburg, to see the abbess,” replied Siegfried. “Be not alarmed! Thou dost not think he hath gone to make arrangements for sending thee to the convent? Albrecht hath no such intention.”

“But the abbess sent her scribever hither to request him to do so.”

“That will be of no avail,” laughed Siegfried. “No one can withstand my brother, not even the abbess, who

formerly possessed some influence over him. Thou dost not know her?"

"Nay," said Oda; "dost thou?"

"Yea, surely. She is beautiful, and as proud as a queen, and hath the power of winning hearts as she will."

"I would fain see her," said Oda, half to herself.

"Thou needst only say so to Albrecht," he answered, "and he will gladly take thee to visit her. Yet I will go with thee likewise, to make sure the abbess doth not hold thee fast."

Oda sighed softly, and was silent.

"Thou art not happy, Countess Oda," began Siegfried, after a pause; "doth anything distress thee?"

Oda shook her head.

"I must try to fulfil my brother's charge," he continued. "Albrecht bade me euliven thee, and seek to win thy favor."

"Was that thy brother's order?" asked Oda.

"Yea," replied Siegfried, smiling; "but such a charge was not needed; and he further said, 'Thou must be her friend and consoler, Siegfried! It is my wish!' And when Albrecht saith, 'It is my wish,' there is nothing to do, Countess Oda, but to obey; but I have begun right stupidly."

Oda laughed, and answered, without embarrassment, "Thou art my friend and consoler already, Count Siegfried."

"Am I so, indeed?" he asked, with a beaming countenance.

"I am thy brother's captive, and must obey him," said she; "but it is very easy to do his bidding, and I will help thee to follow his instructions, so that we shall not fall into disgrace," she added, with a roguish look.

"Now thou lookest blithesome! I have cheered thee, as Albrecht wished."

They were now at the foot of the hill, and slowly ascended the steep pathway to Heimbürg.

Countess Reginhild received them with hearty greeting, and while the brothers talked over Albrecht's message, she chatted with Oda in the balcony. The latter, who had been cut off from all intercourse with women of her own station for weeks, gave herself unreservedly to the enjoyment of the sprightly conversation, during which Reginhild cautiously tried to discover how her guest felt toward Siegfried. Oda fell innocently into the snare, and soon her quick-witted interlocutor learned more than she bargained for.

Siegfried and Oda remained the whole day at Heimbürg, and the four enjoyed a cheerful meal together, Reginhild being alone somewhat quiet and thoughtful.

Toward evening her guests rode back to Regenstein on the horses which had been brought over for that purpose.

When they had gone, Bernhard said to his wife, "A charming maiden! And I heartily wish our fair-haired boy good fortune, but — I have a foreboding that there is trouble in store for him!"

Reginhild nodded gravely, but said nothing.

"Thou also feelest as I do," continued Bernhard. "Is it not so?"

"Yea, but *I* have reason. I have made a strange discovery."

"And pray what is it?"

"I believe that Countess Oda loveth — not Siegfried, but — Albrecht."

"Albrecht! Albrecht!" said her husband in amazement. "Hath she told thee this?"

"Nay; but to me it is as clear as the day."

"Oh! Hilde! Hilde!" cried Bernhard, "I could cud-gel that Bock for bringing the maiden to Regenstein!"

"Blame not the poor child!" said Reginhild, pityingly; "her case is bad enough."

"Why doth she not go to the abbess, at Quedlinburg, where she belongeth?"

"They will not let her go," his wife answered. "One keepeth her in a spirit of defiance, and the other from love."

"Is it possible that *he* knoweth it?" asked Bernhard.

"Albrecht? I think not. He hath no idle time; and, moreover, he hath not eyes for such things. But what will become of Siegfried, when he seeth his anticipated happiness vanish like a dream!"

Count Bernhard sighed. "We have all been spared such troubles as these," he said. "Among all our feuds and fighting with foes, we have never had bitter heart-struggles amongst ourselves."

And he gazed gloomily after the light-hearted pair, as they rode away down the hill.

CHAPTER XIII.

BEFORE the door of the ale-house, in the village of Erkstedt, not far from Halberstadt, under a wide-spreading linden, sat a man of most unprepossessing appearance.

He was a small hunchbacked fellow, with gray hair and a somewhat distorted face, whose crafty expression was increased by the man's extraordinary squint.

His brown jerkin was soiled and patched, and his close-fitting leather hose shone with a doubtful lustre. Near him, upon the bank, lay an old knapsack, filled with Heaven knows what; and before him, upon a rough table, was a stone jug filled with beer. It was late in the afternoon, but if it had been early in the morning, the beer-jug would not have been wanting, for Hinze Habernack suffered continually from fiery thirst, which it was very difficult to extinguish.

For miles around Halberstadt he was known by young and old, and earned his bread in many ways. He called himself a leech, and treated sick cattle as well as human beings by means of herbs, salves, and strange compounds; he knew of a remedy for every wound, carried messages, managed all sorts of crooked business, and finally practised the black art.

He was more feared than liked; and though he was often sent for in case of need, every one was more glad to see him go than come, as he was considered a dangerous tale-bearer, who, for money, was ready to do almost anything. Though he tried to play the part of a frank,

honest fellow, no one trusted him, and yet no one dared openly to denounce him, for he was said to have powerful supporters.

A mysterious shadow hung over his past. He was born in Sautesberg, and had wandered about a good deal. It was rumored that he had crimes upon his conscience, and that his indirect vision was somehow connected with his moral obliquity. As he played tricks, and found his greatest pleasure in practical jokes, he was nicknamed Schabernack, though he would not submit to this cognomen from every one.

He sat now under the blooming and fragrant linden, waiting for Bock von Schlanstedt. Nothnagel and Hasenbart, two of the "Wicked Seven," who at Bock's command had ridden in search of this old fox, had unearthed him at last, and informed him of the knight's wish to see him, whereupon the vagrant had appointed as a rendezvous the ale-house at Erkstedt.

It was not Bock's custom to keep any one waiting, but to-day he was surely very unpunctual, and Hinze Habernack, having already eaten his supper, lost patience and resolved to tarry no longer. When he had emptied the stone jug for the third time, he rapped loudly upon the table, as a summons to the host, who soon made his appearance.

"Another jugful, Hinze?" asked Peter Rübenstreit.

"Nay, I am going, for he cometh not," answered the other. "Bring me the reckoning, Peter. I will pay thee, for I know thou never cheatest me."

"Oh, let it stand!" said the host, who was used to this formula from his guest, who had never yet paid him a penny. "I will take it out of the others."

"That's right! Do so," laughed Hinze; "and if that footpad, Bock von Schlanstedt, should come along, tell him I am at his service in all reasonable things, but

Hinze Habernack is not to be made a fool of, and if he wants anything of me —”

“Hark!” interrupted the host; “hearest thou nothing? There they come, now!”

He was right, for at this moment Bock and Nothnagel came trotting up the village street.

“Well, old fellow, not hanged yet?” cried the former, dismounting. “I have heard nothing of thee for a long time.”

“Thou hast come just in time,” answered Habernack; “a moment later, and I should have been gone.”

“Then we should have ridden after thee, and fetched thee back,” observed Bock, while Nothnagel tied the horses, and drew up two stools to the table, upon which they seated themselves opposite the old man. Peter Rübenstreit brought out three fresh beer-jugs, and then withdrew.

“Thy noble lord, who beareth the stag’s antlers on his shield, understandeth the chase well,” sneered Hinze; “not even gentlewomen are spared.”

“If thou revilest my lord, Schabernack, I will make short work of thee!” exclaimed Bock, starting up.

“Thou great jack-in-the-box!” said the old man, looking at him askew; “I knew thee when thou wert a stupid peasant lad in thy father’s farm-yard.”

“What art thou looking at *me* for?” snarled Nothnagel; “my father hath no farm-yard.”

“I never meant thee, fool!” Habernack cried.

To Bock this unexpected reference to his origin was very vexatious, but he could not help laughing at Nothnagel’s indignation, due to Hinze’s obliquity of vision, and as he desired a service from the latter, he thought it expedient to assume a milder tone.

“Softly, old man!” said he, soothingly. “Come, come, drink with us!”

All three thereupon clinked glasses and drank.

"Now tell me, what wouldst thou of me?" began the vagrant, wiping his mouth, and leaning back against the trunk of the linden.

"Hinze," said Bock, confidentially, as he moved closer to the old man, "how goeth it with our most reverend father, the bishop? Thou art one who canst hear the grass a-growing."

Habernack looked askance at the knight, as he replied, —

"Speak out, Bock von Schlanstedt! I cannot see the whole sky through my fingers!"

"Well, then, we have a neighborly dispute to settle with the bishop, and —"

"And now shivers run down the back," jeered the old man, "because thou hast heard that he is calling his forces together. But ye need not trouble yourselves; he doth not mean to attack ye."

"He goeth into Swabia, doth he not? To Falkenstein?"

"To Swabia, but not to Falkenstein," answered Habernack. "To Aschersleben."

"To Aschersleben?"

"Yea. The Princess Elizabeth, Otto's widow, by birth Margravine von Meissen, will wed Count Friedrich von Orlamünde," Habernack explained; "and she desireth the blessing of the church. This can be had most easily by resigning to it the city of Aschersleben, which the bishop coveteth. Young Elizabeth is willing, because she cannot give up her Friedel, but the city may object to being under the crosier, and in that case the bishop will seize it with an armed hand."

"A city for a gold finger-ring! One might as well give a horse for a peppercorn!" laughed Bock. "We

three are to be praised for our wisdom. We have neither wife nor child, and would not so much as pick up a shoe-nail for the glance of a wench's eye!"

"Nay, nay, Sir Bock!" said Hinze; "I know one who hath always been a favorite with the women!"

"What! thou old good-for-nought!" exclaimed Bock. "Am I a woman-killer?"

"I did not say so, master," answered the old man, slyly; "but I meant thee, nevertheless."

Bock twisted his long mustache complacently, nothing averse to such a reputation, and proceeded to question the vagabond further.

"So," he began, "Schabernack, my good fellow, how soon will the bishop make this expedition against Ascherleben?"

"Oh, not for some time yet. I have only heard a little bird whistle that something is in the wind."

"How many horsemen and how many foot-soldiers will he bring into the field?" asked Bock, not misled by Habernack's vague way of speaking.

"How should I know? Am I his lieutenant? But I will seek for more particulars, and the information will be worth more to the 'Wicked Seven' than all the oats their horses eat out of other folks' cribs."

"If thou wilt open thy squinting eyes as wide as thou dost thy crooked mouth, thou canst not fail to get all the information we need. And thou must bring it to us speedily."

"I have the same disposition as of yore," was the answer.

"Thou shalt be well rewarded," Bock replied.

Habernack shook his gray head, and said, with a grin,—

"Master Bock, the world is the world, and will ever remain the world, as long as it lasteth. A mass must

always be paid for beforehand, and I am the bishop's subject. How much shall I have?"

"I have nothing to give you myself, but Count Albrecht is no haggler. Therefore, do not fear, but go to work."

"What would ye know?"

"If the bishop hath his eye likewise on Falkenstein; also what his forces are, and how much assistance he will give the Blankenburgs against us."

"The Blankenburgs?" asked Habernack, listening attentively. "Have ye quarrelled with them, too?"

"As though thou didst not know that!"

"Yea, I knew it," said the old fox, — which was a lie; "but when do they intend marching against ye? I heard it was to be soon."

"So at least they threaten. It is on account of Lauenburg, which must be ours."

"Then the abbess will give it to ye?"

"Or we take it ourselves," added Bock.

"Or ye take it yourselves," repeated the old man, concealing his pleasure and astonishment. "But the Wernigerodes will join them against ye," he went on, insinuatingly.

"And half a dozen others," added Bock, not seeing that he was giving Habernack information, instead of the reverse.

"I verily believe that ye are growing chicken-hearted," jeered the old man.

"Say not so," cried the other, angrily, "or something will tickle thy crooked back, so that thou wilt not be able to stand upright for three days!"

"Threaten me not, Bock von Schlanstedt! I will do what I can to bring thee all the intelligence thou wishest. But forget not what thou hast promised me, Sir Knight. I am a poor old man, who hardly earneth his bread, and must soon depart —"

"When thou hast drank thyself to death, thou meanest," interrupted Bock. "We have all had enough for to-day. The monks of Huysburg brew strong beer, and I will not help thee on thy downward track. Thou knowest all, Hinze. Let me see thee soon, or send me word where to meet thee."

"I will come to Regenstein myself, if ye will let me out of your mouse-trap again with a whole skin," said Habernack.

"Have no fear. We can use thee better elsewhere. I promise thee a safe exit."

Thereupon he arose, called the host, and paid the reckoning for the three, while Nothnagel tightened the horses' girths. Habernack squinted at Bock's small leather purse, in which little enough was to be seen; then he slung his knapsack over his back, shook hands with the others, and went silently on his way.

Bock swung himself with youthful agility into the saddle. Nothnagel also mounted his bony mare, and Peter Rübenstreit bowed low to his departing guests, who had so questionable a reputation, but who for all had paid him honestly.

The expression of Nothnagel's scarred and weather-beaten face, with the dark gray hair hanging down under his helmet, was sullen, as he rode by the side of the knight, who sat as upright on his horse as if returning from victory.

"Nothnagel," said he, after a pause, "we contrived to worm much information out of old Schabernack."

"H'm! To my dull wits, it seemeth as if he had learnt more from us than we from him. He now knoweth everything, and we know nothing."

"Nothnagel, thou dost not understand," said Bock, loftily. "Thou hast not the natural gift, as I have, of putting two and two together, and drawing conclusions."

Upon this he put spurs to his horse, and trotted on a little ahead. His comrade, however, did not agree with the knight as to the manner in which he had executed his important mission.

Count Albrecht's opinion coincided with Nothnagel's, when Bock made his report in the evening, and boasted of what he had drawn out of Habernack.

"Drawn out?" repeated the count, angrily. "Let out, thou meanest, all that the old fox needeth to know. Bock, I am not pleased with thee!"

With lowered crest the knight crept away, and it gradually dawned upon him that the crafty old man had extracted particulars from him which he only feigned to know, that he might lead Bock on further, and it was for this that he had paid Habernack's score!

"But I will remember it against the old rascal, and Nothnagel is a sheep's-head not to have given me a hint: for what else did I take the stupid churl?"

The only news which Count Albrecht learnt from Bock was the design of the bishop upon Aschersleben, which purpose it was now too late to thwart. This new stroke of the enemy vexed him sorely, as it would establish the bishop's power in Swabia, and assist him in the acquisition of Falkenstein, but he resolved to take no step which might delay the marriage of the Princess Elizabeth with the Count von Orlamünde, as they were both valued friends.

The following morning Hinze Habernack stood before the bishop of Halberstadt, and repeated, word for word, all that Bock had unwittingly betrayed. The former was gratified to hear of the feud between Count Albrecht and the Blankenburgs; his continued efforts, therefore, had not been without result.

"Whence hast thou thy knowledge?" he asked.

“Reverend sir, I smelt the meat roasting,” was the reply; “and I have been creeping about Regenstein till I could catch and sound the count’s followers, one by one. My scanty savings have thus flown away I had to decoy the churls to the ale-house to discover all, my lord.”

“I understand,” laughed the bishop, taking a handful of silver from a chest, and putting it into the old man’s hand. “Come again, when thou hast further tidings for me. There is more for thee in the chest.”

Habernack crept out backwards like a crab, with many bows, and once in the street, he carefully counted his reward.

“I wonder who payeth best, the count or the bishop,” he chuckled to himself; “but that I will see by bleeding them both!”

CHAPTER XIV.

Bock's careless blabbing to Habernack angered Count Albrecht sorely, for he had no doubt that the bishop as well as the Blankenburgs would soon know of his project to seize Lauenburg, and unite to throw all possible obstacles in his way. Now he could no longer leave his cousin's threatening letter unanswered, and to make his reply more emphatic, he determined to carry it himself.

He summoned the garrisons of Heimbürg, of Westerhausen and Derenburg, and of Benzingerode and Börnecke, to appear the following day, and uniting them with the whole force at Regenstein, he rode to Blankenburg at the head of this considerable body of troops, with his brothers Bernhard and Siegfried. The poorly defended village was occupied, the castle surrounded, and Albrecht and Bernhard demanded admission, after instructing Siegfried to assault the castle and set the hamlet on fire if after entering they should signal to him from above, or if within an hour they should not appear.

Under the circumstances, an entrance was soon granted the two counts, though their reception by the Blankenburgs, father and son, was anything but friendly.

"We are aware that we owe our cousins an answer, and for a better understanding have brought it ourselves," began Albrecht, as he and Bernhard entered the hall. "Ye and your associates have objected to our holding Gersdorf unless we assist ye to obtain Lauenburg. Are ye still of the same mind?"

"We are, in good sooth!" answered Count Berthold, shortly, a thick-set, sturdy man, with a defiant air.

"I would fain induce thee to think differently, cousin," said Albrecht. "Gersdorf is ours, and Lauenburg will be."

"That remaineth to be seen," Berthold replied.

"What have ye to do with Gersdorf?" continued Albrecht; "and why do ye desire a fortress belonging to the chapter?"

"Gersdorf was long since promised to us," asserted the other.

"By whom?" Albrecht asked; "by the bishop, who hath nought to do with it, and who wished ye to become his train-bearers, and to make common cause with him against us at his pleasure; to set ye on, as dogs are set upon the wild boar."

"The comparison is not altogether a bad one, cousin," laughed Count Berthold. "Thou art wild and savage enough."

"Thou shalt feel my tusks, gentle cousin!" growled Von Regenstein. "But first, I will ask thee: once for all, wilt thou be friendly, or art thou determined to be at enmity with us?"

"We must have Gersdorf or Lauenburg!" exclaimed the lord of Blankenburg.

"And verily I say ye shall have neither!" cried Albrecht, striking the table vehemently with his mailed hand. "Extort all thou canst from the bishop, but do not cross my path, or I will pluck out thy best feathers!"

"To do that requireth two,—one who plucketh, and the other who alloweth himself to be plucked," answered Berthold, stubbornly.

"Cousin, take back thy challenge!" exclaimed Albrecht, menacingly.

"Nay! nay! nay!"

"Good! Then look at this!" and Albrecht drew from the hunting-pocke^t, which hung at his belt, a folded

parchment, and an inkhorn and reed pen. "Thou hast scared us at such a rate with thy letter of defiance that thou must needs recompense us a little. Here is a deed of sale of thy fortresses of Allrode, Stiege, and Hasselfelde; they lie midway between Lauenburg and our own Elbingerode and Botfeld, and, therefore, I need them."

Count Berthold laughed grimly.

"Oh, it is a true deed of sale! I will pay thee down," Albrecht assured him, drawing a heavy purse from his hunting-pocket, which jingled as he threw it on the table. "Thou shalt not say the robber count hath plundered thee. Here are two thousand gold marks. Take them, and sign the deed."

"Two thousand marks!" repeated Count Berthold, scornfully. "The fortresses are worth that, fourfold."

"If thou settest the price," laughed Albrecht; "but this time I set it, and what is lacking thou canst consider as compensation for thy letter of defiance."

"This is robbery of thine own kinsfolk," cried Berthold, wrathfully.

"Call it what thou wilt! Thou desireth Lauenburg, I desire the fortresses; the only difference is, that I can accomplish my wish and thou canst not," returned Albrecht, pushing toward him the inkstand and pen.

"It is worse than robbery, it is treachery, which we will not submit to," interposed the young count.

"Cousin Rudolf, thou hadst best be silent!" said Count Bernhard, approaching him.

"Ye seem to forget that ye are intruders here, Cousin Bernhard," observed Berthold.

"Thievish intruders!" added Rudolf.

"Be still, or I will soon silence thee!" and Bernhard raised his hand threateningly.

"Call us foes!" cried Albrecht; "ye have wished it, ye have challenged us, and those who defy the Regensteins must suffer for it. Sign the parchment; my patience is at an end."

"I will never sign it!" roared Berthold.

"Bernhard, go to the window, and draw the sword!"

Bernhard did as his brother directed, drew his sword, and opened the window.

"Siegfried is outside with eighty men," said Albrecht, turning to the Blankenburgs; "one motion of the sword, and your castle will be stormed, and with the hamlet burned to the ground!"

"Incendiaries that ye are!" exclaimed Berthold.

"Write!" thundered Albrecht.

"Nay, never!" cried the other.

Albrecht beckoned to his brother, and Bernhard brandished the sword as a signal from the window. Loud cries arose from below, and reverberating blows upon the castle gates followed.

"Hasten, before they break in! Thy small force will be cut down before thine eyes!" said Bernhard.

"I will pay thee back!" Berthold shouted.

"Nay, keep the gold!" laughed Count Albrecht; "it is yours; only sign the deed!"

The cries and blows grew ever louder. The castle gates fell in, and the garrison began to shoot at the assailants.

"The hamlet is burning!" exclaimed Bernhard.

Both the Blankenburgs sprang to the windows; a thick smoke rose from below.

"Sign, father," whispered the son; "they are in earnest."

Berthold went to the table, took the parchment and signed it with trembling hand.

"There!" he groaned, throwing the pen at Albrecht's feet, with hatred in his eyes.

While Bernhard beckoned to the assailants to suspend hostilities, Albrecht folded the parchment, and said, as he put it again in his pouch, —

"The fortresses are now mine! Any trespassers caught on my territory will stand much in need of grace! Heed that, Cousin Berthold! And now we will hinder thee no longer from extinguishing the fire. Come, Bernhard!"

As the Regensteins turned to go, Count Berthold called after them threateningly, —

"We will soon return your visit! We shall come, never fear, cousin robber!"

A loud laugh was the only response.

In the court-yard Albrecht drew his sword, and ordered that the gates should be opened.

The soldiers obeyed, and both the brothers strode out, and mounting their horses, joined Siegfried, and rode off at the head of their men.

The opportunity for plunder was too tempting to resist, and some of the soldiers drove before them a number of cattle, without any attempt on Count Albrecht's part to prevent them.

After this bold stroke, with the result of which Count Albrecht was more than satisfied, he bethought himself that the sooner Lauenburg was now secured, the better, and he concluded to attempt it three days later.

When the appointed morning came, all was stir and bustle at Regenstein, which Oda and Eilika failed not to observe, as both Siegfried and Bock were especially active, and plainly showed by their behavior that something unusual was on foot, though the object of the expedition was carefully concealed.

For two days after her sudden confinement by Bock, Eilika had obstinately held herself aloof, feigning not to see him when they met. But she could not hold out against his polite greetings, or preserve utter silence when he made humorous and provocative allusions. Soon she began to resume her former friendly tone, and they indulged as before in continual amicable skirmishing. On this particular morning Bock made himself as conspicuous as possible, running hastily hither and thither, shouting out his orders, and glancing constantly at the upper castle to see if Eilika were not secretly watching him. When she at last appeared in the court-yard, he rushed toward her, brandishing an axe, so that she drew back in alarm. With a solemn face and disconnected words, he spoke darkly of bidding farewell on the eve of bold deeds, bade her think of him the following night, and begged her to give him some memento, a neckerchief or a ribbon, to charm away danger.

"Thou mayst cut off a lock of my hair with thine axe, Sir Knight," laughed she; "but beware thou dost not hurt me!"

Bock took the jest for earnest, and tried the edge with his thumb.

"Sutdüinkel!" he cried, with an important air, "sharpen this axe for me, quickly!"

"When wilt thou return, Sir Knight?" asked Eilika, glad to have the dangerous weapon removed.

"Heaven knoweth!" cried Bock. "Give me one parting kiss, dear maiden! Perchance, it may be the last, as it will, alas, be the first!" and he caressed his long mustache as he spoke.

The girl screamed, turned and fled, while Bock looked after her in dismay, like one who sees a captured bird suddenly slip through his fingers.

In the course of the afternoon the "Wicked Seven" left Regenstein, but not together, or at the same time. They rode off at different hours and by different ways.

After their departure, quiet seemed to settle down upon Regenstein. Eilika had little faith in the doughty deeds of her adorer, and the perils to which he had alluded. Oda, on her side, read in Siegfried's glances a secret trouble which she could not interpret. She could not attribute his melancholy to fear, for he knew not what the word meant; she therefore conjectured that this serious undertaking was to decide the fate of the Regensteins. She little suspected that Siegfried's feeling was altogether due to his distress at leaving her. If the assault were successful, and Lauenburg fell into their hands, Albrecht had directed that Siegfried should remain as governor of the fortress, who would thus be parted from Oda indefinitely.

In the afternoon he bade her farewell, with difficulty hiding his emotion, but he said nothing to her of a prolonged separation. He was to meet Bernhard and ride with him to the monastery of Wendhusen, which was under the sway of the abbess.

Albrecht himself, who was to follow them in the evening, remained till then with Oda.

He climbed with her to a stone seat which stood upon an eminence, whence they had a wide view over forest and plain to the distant mountains.

Deep stillness reigned in the castle, save that now and again subdued sounds rose faintly from below. It seemed good to Oda to be here alone with Albrecht, and she could have lain her head like a child upon the shoulder of the stalwart man, in happy security and confidence.

With her admiration for him was united a slight feeling of awe. Her manner was one of gentle submission, and

her eyes, when they rested upon his face, had a pleading expression which was almost pathetic.

This was due to her continual regret that he was making enemies on her behalf, and involving himself in danger. Her anxiety had increased to an almost unbearable point, owing to the unusual note of preparation and to Seigfried's mysterious departure, and Oda felt that she could conceal it no longer.

"Sir Count," she began, hesitatingly, "I am filled with uneasiness when I think of the difficulties which may be threatening thee. I fear me, thou art taking some serious step, the cause of which is my sojourn here. I pray thee, tell me, if thou wilt, what thou art about to do, for the sake of my peace!"

Albrecht looked kindly at her, and said, with a quiet smile, "Why shouldst thou fret thyself, Countess Oda, because we soldiers ride out and seize with a strong hand that which we would have?"

"Thou ridest not out on the highway, to plunder like the men-at-arms, who gain their livelihood thus," she answered.

"Yet dost thou not know what they call me throughout the land?" laughed Albrecht. "Am I not the robber count?"

"Nay, that art thou not," cried she, warmly. "Thy foes so call thee, but the poor and oppressed whom thou helpest, remitting their tithes and rents, they bless and praise thee. And they are right; thou doest much for others; thou takest nothing for thyself."

"I thank thee for thy good opinion, but thou deceivest thyself, sweet maiden. I will confess to thee that this very night we would take a fortress, with all it containeth."

"Falkenstein?" asked she, startled.

"Nay, not Falkenstein this time." Then pointing to the

right of Quedlinburg, "Seest thou those gray walls and towers behind the wooded hill yonder? That is Lauenburg, and to-morrow morning, before cock-crow, it must be ours."

Oda looked at him in surprise. "Is the fortress strong? Will it cost thee a hard fight?"

"Fear not," he answered; "doubtless we shall all return alive. The worst thing that will befall will be the anger of the abbess, for the stronghold belongeth to her convent, and my contest with her will be more severe than the attack on Lauenburg."

"But thou wilt be able to satisfy her," said Oda, troubled.

"I hope so," he answered; "her vehemence is soon tempered by her judgment. She is a clear-headed, high-hearted woman!"

Oda apparently assented, but said nothing.

"We always quarrel when we are together," he continued. "When I visited her recently, thou wert the subject of contention."

"I!" exclaimed Oda, in astonishment.

"Yea; the abbess wished to have thee in her keeping, and charged me with holding thee here by force, that I might thus be able to look into thy beautiful blue eyes, and have thee near me."

"How knoweth she, then —" Oda did not finish the hasty question, but checked herself with a blush.

"That thou hast blue eyes?" cried the count. "I told her so myself, and likewise that an angel of love and peace had taken up her abode at Regenstein."

"Count Albrecht!" said the startled girl.

"It is true, dear Oda!" he continued, fervently, while he bent down and took her hand in his.

Oda's heart beat faster, and her hand trembled

“And the bad Jutta would not believe me. ‘Ask my brother Siegfried,’ I said to her; ‘he knoweth it still better.’”

Oda tried to withdraw her hand, but the count would not permit it, and asked, “Hath Siegfried told thee that he may remain at Lauenburg?”

“Nay,” she replied, quietly; “he told me nothing.”

“I have so arranged it,” said he; “and thou wilt have to stay with me here alone for a little.”

Oda’s heart gave a bound, but she replied, “Thou wilt be very lonely without him, Count Albrecht.”

“With thee, dear Oda?” he answered, cheerily. “I think not.”

“But if the abbess insisteth upon my going to the convent,” she asked, shyly, “must I not do her bidding?”

“Nay; that I have already made very clear to her.”

“Wilt thou not lose her favor, if thou deniest me to her?”

“I will hazard it,” said the count, rising quickly.

Oda rose also, and they descended the hill together.

“I shall see thee before I go,” Albrecht said, as she entered the castle, and he went to the stables. In the evening he ordered that food should be brought, and sent to ask Oda if she would come to him.

She presently appeared and sat with him while he ate, the better to prepare himself for the night’s work. He was fully armed, and wore a tunic over his shirt of mail. Finally he stood up, and donned his helmet and steel gauntlets. But before he put on the right one, he took Oda’s hand and said, “Farewell, Countess Oda. Sleep tranquilly. Klinkhard, the armorer, will watch over thee, so that thou needst have no fear. I hope, at the latest, to return to-morrow evening, and I assure thee I shall gladly do so.”

"Fare thee well, Count Albrecht, and may God protect thee," she answered with emotion, following him at the same time to the court-yard, where he swung himself into the saddle, and, accompanied by Schadow, rode rapidly away.

Once upon the level road, he put spurs to his horse, and galloped onward impetuously, so that Schadow, on his heavier beast, found it difficult to follow him, and shook his sober head at his master's reckless pace.

Oda climbed again to the stone seat and listened. The sound of the horses' hoofs came to her distinctly through the still air, and gradually died away; but the maiden continued sitting there alone with her thoughts in the gathering darkness. Everything below her disappeared from view; she felt as if lifted above the earth, while from one bright star overhead a ray of hope seemed to fall upon her.

CHAPTER XV.

THE castle of Lauenburg was successfully taken by the Regensteins, the negligence of the garrison and the condition of the almost dying castellan making the enterprise easy. When the assailants in the early dawn climbed the steep hill, and crept to the fortress through the trees and bushes, they found the drawbridge down, and the watch so sound asleep that they never heard the resounding footsteps which crossed it; no challenge followed, and silence reigned within the gates.

Count Albrecht accordingly resorted to artifice. He ordered his men to conceal themselves till sunrise. Then he presented himself at the gate with his brother Bernhard, and knocked and shouted, whereupon was heard at last a surly response.

"How long do ye sleep in your burrow?" cried Count Albrecht. "It is not far from mid-day. Up with ye!"

"Who is there?" sounded from within.

"The champion of our gracious lady of Quedlinburg, Count von Regenstein! Rise, ye sluggards!"

"Champion? Ho! ho! we must make sure of that!" returned the watch.

More talking was heard inside, but no one opened the gate. Presently a soldier put his head out of a loophole in the tower, but drew it quickly back when he recognized the two counts upon the drawbridge. Within, voices were raised in altercation, and finally the bolts were drawn back, the careless watch having forgotten to lower the portcullis.

As the right division of the gate was cautiously opened, the two counts rushed in and dealt the watch such vigor-

ous blows with their mailed gloves that the men staggered back, too much stunned to use their weapons.

"Knaves!" cried Count Albrecht. "Is this the way ye guard the fortress of the lady abbess?"

His followers now pressed in after him, and laid about them sturdily. The watch upon this set up a loud cry, and fled to the central watch-tower, but the pursuers were close at their heels, and pressed in with them before the rest of the garrison could make any resistance. Suddenly, on the steps appeared the tottering figure of the sick old castellan in his bed-gown, a drawn sword in his feeble grasp.

Count Albrecht shouted to him, —

"Stay where thou art, Leutfried! We are the Regensteins!"

A groan was the old man's only answer. He pressed his left hand convulsively to his breast, and, overcome by the shock, suddenly fell forward dead, his lifeless body being borne back to the bed whence, with a supreme effort, he had for the last time just arisen.

All resistance was now at an end, and the Regensteins were in full possession of the castle. Count Albrecht ordered food for his men, and after all had refreshed themselves, he took a careful survey of the fortress, the result of which was highly satisfactory.

"See, Siegfried!" exclaimed Günther; "how neighborly Gersdorf looketh. We can easily signal to one another. And seest thou Halberstadt there behind? I truly believe I see the scaffolding on the cathedral towers. May Heaven bless the morning pottage, reverend bishop, which the Regensteins have prepared for thee!"

"And there to the left towereth Regenstein beyond that hill, but I do not see my Heimbürg," observed Bernhard.

Siegfried was silent. What *he* wished to see was altogether different, far dearer to him than the whole Hartz territory.

Meanwhile, Bock mustered the little garrison, and delivered an harangue to the soldiers who had been too lazy to draw up the bridge or lower the portcullis; one far from flattering, telling them they deserved to be hanged, beheaded, and broken on the wheel, and that they ought to thank him that they were allowed to escape with broken heads, and would soon be taught the true duty of a soldier. They who were slumbering at their post in the hour of attack he ordered put in irons.

Albrecht gave Siegfried the necessary instructions, enjoining upon him to make arrangements for Leutfried's honorable interment, and while bidding him farewell, he quietly asked what he should say to Oda.

Siegfried answered, in a rather melancholy tone, —

“From the watch-tower I can see Regenstein. Wilt thou say to Countess Oda that I will mount the tower every evening at sunset, and look toward Regenstein. If I could know that she were sitting on our stone seat up there at the same time, looking hitherward, it would be a comfortable thought.”

Albrecht promised to say so to the maiden, and thought of his own conversation with her yesterday on this same seat.

Count Albrecht only retained at Lauenburg the armorer — an elderly and trusty man, a hunter who knew the forest thoroughly — and Leutfried's house servants. He took the whole garrison with him, dividing the soldiers between Gunteckenburg and Gersdorf, and left a number of men from both these fortresses with Siegfried, so that the force at Lauenburg was stronger than it had been before.

The three brothers rode off at the head of their little band, promising Siegfried to visit him soon, and the latter, proud of his new responsibility, though sad to be separated from Oda, stood watching them as long as they were in sight. Günther returned with his body of men by the nearest route to Gersdorf, while the others rode on to Quedlinburg.

"This hath been child's play," remarked Albrecht to his brother Bernhard; "if every place I desire to hold between Oker and Bode were as easy to obtain as Lauenburg!"

"Crave not more to rule over," said Bernhard; "but be satisfied with what we have."

"To wield power is to live," answered the elder, with glowing eyes; "but, Bernhard, now cometh a struggle indeed! Wilt go with me to the abbess?"

"Dost thou fear to face her alone?"

"By my soul, I think I do!" said the other.

"I would gladly accompany thee, but I believe thou canst mollify her best by thyself," laughed Bernhard. "I will await thee at the prior's."

"Be it so!" answered Albrecht; "but forget not to say a benedicite for me!"

"And a thanksgiving, if thou returnest with thine eyes in thy head!"

"And a deed of tenure in my pouch," added Albrecht.

The abbess received the count with the more pleasure that she did not expect him so soon. After their angry interview, which she immediately regretted, she felt ashamed of her jealousy of Oda, which she had so plainly betrayed. When he appeared to-day, therefore, so unexpectedly, and yet so longed for, her heart went out to meet him, and she resolved that he should not, on this occasion at least, leave her in anger.

"What dost thou bring, Sir Count, or what bringeth thee?" she asked, with a smiling face.

"A piece of news, gracious lady, which mayhap will grieve thee, but giveth me hope," answered Count Albrecht, with some constraint.

"I cannot guess thy riddle," said she, cheerfully; "how can I be grieved at that which maketh thee hopeful?"

"I would rather the conditions were reversed, my lady. In a word, then, — Leutfried is dead."

"Well," she replied; "thou seest I am not overcome, and if thou hast not killed the good old man, I will pardon thee for bringing me such tidings. But is he, then, dead, surely?"

"As surely as I stand living before thee here."

"Peace to his ashes!" said Jutta. "Wilt thou not be seated, dear Count?"

"Surely," he replied, seating himself.

"And now," continued she, — "now we must bethink ourselves of a new castellan for Lauenburg."

"Yea, now we must have a new castellan," he repeated, beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"Canst thou propose any one, Count Albrecht?" said she, mischievously.

"I? Nay! — that is — gracious lady, it is thy castle; thou alone must decide."

"But I know nothing about such matters."

"And I know only too well," thought Albrecht, as he passed his hand over his moist brow.

"I may need no castellan in future; the chapter gaineth naught by holding Lauenburg," said the abbess.

"Then give it to some one in fief: one who can defend it."

"That is my idea, likewise; I have thought of the

counts of Blankenburg, who have offered me considerable inducement," Jutta continued, her eyes sparkling.

But Count Albrecht failed to notice her expression in his dismay. "The Blankenburgs? My lady! The Blankenburgs?"

"Yea; why not?"

"Thou hast promised me not to dispose of the fortress behind my back!"

"And am I not doing it before thy very eyes?"

"Thou wilt never dispose of it thus!" he exclaimed, resolutely.

"Count Albrecht!"

"Never! Never! The Blankenburgs are my enemies; the enemies of thy defender must be thine also!"

She looked at him for a moment, and then stretching out her hand to him, she said, heartily, "Thou art right! Thy foes *are* my foes!" and with a merry laugh she sprang to her feet. "Enough of this, my dear lord of Lauenburg! How couldst thou think for a moment that I would give the castle to any other man than Albrecht von Regenstein?"

Count Albrecht was astonished and dazzled by the bewitching grace of the beautiful abbess. Surely this was easier than the seizure of the fortress. How useless had been his fears! Oh, that Bernhard could witness this interview!

"Gracious princess, receive my most heartfelt thanks!" he cried, warmly grasping her hand.

But she drew it back with a charming movement. "Thou must ask my pardon for doubting me. Stay! Before thou thankest me, thou must first make thy plea. I have never yet heard a prayer from thee, and I would see how Count Albrecht appears in the attitude of entreaty."

"Gracious Heaven!" thought Albrecht. "I must sue for the castle, while Siegfried holdeth it at this moment with his sixteen men!" But there was no help for it!

"Noble princess and most gracious abbess of the free convent of Quedlinburg! I humbly beseech thee, of thy good favor, to invest me with the fortress of Lauenburg!" said Albrecht, most courteously.

Whereupon she answered, with a lofty grace, "Most noble Count! we, Jutta, by the grace of God, abbess of Quedlinburg, promise and vow, by virtue of a written deed, witnessed and sealed, to invest thee in lawful enfeoffment with our fortress of Lauenburg. Rise, my liegeman!"

He could not rise, for he had not kneeled, but he took her hand, and pressed his lips upon it with courtly reverence, saying, "I thank thee once more, gracious princess."

The count now enjoyed comparative freedom, but it was far otherwise with his conscience.

The abbess then rang a bell, and ordered that the scrivener should come to her.

"Florencius," said she, as he entered the room, "draw up a deed of enfeoffment for the Count von Regenstein, granting him our castle of Lauenburg."

"I have one already prepared, gracious lady," answered Florencius, with an air of satisfaction; "only that the name of the noble feudatory is lacking."

"Add it immediately, thou forecasting scribe, and then bring me the parchment to sign."

Whereupon Florencius withdrew to execute the abbess's order.

And now only a few moments would intervene before Count Albrecht became the lawful master of Lauenburg. If he should accept the document from Jutta's hand in

silence, the matter would be settled beyond recall and with most unhoped-for despatch. Possibly, in fact probably, the abbess would never know of the usurpation of the castle before the investiture, but rest in the belief that he had acquired it in a legitimate manner. But it would be abusing her confidence were he not to confess that he had already taken possession of the fortress. Yet, on the other hand, who could say that she would then be willing to sign the deed? Would she not refuse to sanction such an arbitrary act? And if so, such a propitious moment as this could never return, and the prospect of coming to any amicable agreement with the aggrieved abbess would be small indeed.

While Count Albrecht was thus hesitating, Florencius returned, handed Jutta the completed document and again withdrew.

The abbess spread it upon the table, seated herself and took the pen.

At this moment the count approached her quickly, laid his hand on hers, and cried, "Stay, my lady! Hear me, first!"

She looked up in surprise. "Dost thou not wish Lauenburg?" she asked, laughingly.

"My lady—I have it already."

"Thou meanest that my word is sufficient?" she said.

"I mean that early this morning I scaled and seized the fortress."

"Thou hast dreamed it, and with a stroke of this pen thy dream shall be fulfilled. I know," she added, "how easy and natural it is to dream what one longeth for, one possesseth."

"I have not dreamed it—I have done it!" he exclaimed, almost impatiently. "I rode to Lauenburg last night, with my brothers and a handful of troops, attacked and

seized the castle. I would have thee know it before thou signest the deed."

Jutta threw down the pen, crying, sharply, "Thou didst slay my castellan?"

"Nay," answered the count; "no one injured him; he died of the shock. And it was time that he died, my lady! The fortress was in too feeble hands; the draw-bridge was down, the portcullis was up, the watch asleep; upon the first assault it might have fallen into any hands."

"And thou knewest it?"

"Nay; if I had, I should have told thee, or taken it sooner."

"And thou hast truly taken it? It is no joke?" she asked, with a lingering doubt in her mind.

"In good sooth, it is no joke! I have assuredly taken the castle."

Then she started up, and stood before him like an enraged lioness, with flaming eyes. Words failed her. She strode up and down, as though she did not see him. Presently she stopped, and throwing back her head, exclaimed, "Thou hast first practised treachery, and then played me a miserable trick. It is shameful, Sir Count! Truly shameful!"

"Let loose thy thunders, and when thou art willing to hear me, I will speak," answered the count; and leaning on his sword, he gazed fixedly out of the window.

"I will hear nothing!" cried Jutta. "Dost think I am thus to be trifled with! With a false smile on thy lips, thou camest to beg for something of which thou hast already robbed me; stole it away like a thief in the night, when I have been for a year looking forward to the pleasure of bestowing it upon thee! This is thy chivalry, Count von Regenstein!"

Albrecht remained silent and motionless.

"Answer me! Callest thou this chivalrous?" she cried, approaching him.

"A woman cannot understand such matters!" returned the count, coolly.

"A fine answer! As the deed, so is the speech!"

"Presently thou wilt praise the deed," replied Albrecht, turning toward her. "There was danger in every moment's delay; only in this way could I keep the fortress for thee. I acted also on my own account; that I do not deny, for it was necessary for my security. The Blankenburgs coveted it, and the Quedlinburgers, and the bishop is spreading his nets everywhere, and snatching cities and strongholds. When I came hither the last time, I meant to explain it to thee, but I could get no opportunity for rational talk. Then I thought, 'What need of longer waiting? The princess doth not understand the matter, yet she will be glad to have it decided for her.'"

"And so thou didst act the part of the robber count," said the abbess, bitterly. "There was a time when thou thoughtest differently; when my words had some weight with thee; when my wishes were gratified, and thou didst nought that I disapproved. If thou hast forgotten it, I have not. What shall I do now? Thou hast invaded rights, which I must and will guard. Shall I quietly let this pass? Never! Not even from thee! Thou art magistrate of the province,—before what bar shall I summon thee? Thou art protector of the convent,—who shall protect me from thee! Thou wast my friend,—and now, what art thou but a foe?"

"I have ever sought to increase thy power, but thou art insatiable. I have trusted thee blindly, and believed my prerogatives safe in thy hands. For thy sake I broke with the bishop, quarrelled with the council yonder in the city, repulsed the counts of Blankenburg, and closed my

eyes to the disorderly lives of the monks of Wiperti. But all in vain! Thou hast accepted all, and then laughed at thy soft-hearted, credulous friend behind her back; this is the thanks I get!"

"Art thou now ready to hear me?" asked the count.

"I am now ready to order the evacuation of Lauenburg this very day! Not one of your men must remain within its walls!"

Count Albrecht shook his head. "I have given the new castellan very different orders,—to let no one but our men enter the gates!"

"And pray, who is the new castellan?"

"My brother Siegfried."

"Thy brother Siegfried!" Again the abbess threw back her head, and darting a quick glance at Albrecht, she said, haughtily, "And Countess Oda is with him?"

The blood rushed to the count's face, as he answered, bluntly, "My lady, hast thou lost thy reason?"

"Where is Oda?" she continued, sharply.

"At Regenstein! Where else should she be?"

The abbess laughed a scornful laugh, saying, "I have sense enough, Sir Count, to penetrate this manœuvre. Thou couldst not wait to get possession of my castle by fair means, so anxious wert thou to find a place for thy dear brother, who was one too many for thee at Regenstein. Oh, it is a famous plot! But does thy brother acknowledge his debt of gratitude for what thou hast done for him?"

The count's blood boiled, but controlling himself with an effort, he replied, "Gracious lady, what is done is done; to-morrow thou wilt feel differently. Let us now at least declare a truce, and perchance thou mayst even be willing to set thy princely hand to this deed of tenure!"

On this the abbess stepped to the table, took the parch-

ment, and approaching the count, with a sudden motion violently tore it through the middle, threw the pieces at his feet, and cried, "So much for your deed; this is my answer!"

And then, what should Count Albrecht do but suddenly throw his arms around her, with a kind of restrained fury, holding her so that she could not move, and exclaiming, "Beauteous art thou, my noble lady, in thy wrath; and fast as I hold thee now, I will hold thy Lauenburg, deed or no deed; and so pledge I my faith as thy liegeman!" Then, before she could collect herself, he impressed a quick kiss upon her brow, and as quickly releasing the amazed lady, lightly said, "Farewell, till we meet again!" and hurried away, shutting the door after him with resounding force.

The abbess stood as one paralyzed, trying to breathe, to think. At last, collecting herself with difficulty, she rang for her waiting-woman, and ordered that Master Willekin von Herrkestorf, the chancellor of the chapter, should be summoned immediately.

Meanwhile, in the cool refectory of the St. Wiperti monastery, Bernhard and Bock, with the fat friar and two monks, sat comfortably around the table, waiting for Albrecht, who, after a considerable interval, entered the room.

"God bless thy going out and thy coming in, Sir Count!" said the prior, rising.

Count Bernhard said nothing, but looked inquiringly at his brother.

"Nay," said Albrecht, answering the look, and shaking his head. "Come, let us ride on, now."

But the monks begged him to remain and partake of refreshment, which he finally consented to do, giving himself for the moment to good-fellowship, and putting away

from him his late strange encounter with the abbess. But he did not linger long; he soon set off with Bernhard, followed by Bock and his six comrades. On the road he told his brother all that had occurred, except the manner of his parting with the abbess. "But no matter," he concluded; "what we have we keep, and I am ready to hazard anything I possess that the sun will not set seven times upon her wrath. Moreover, I know how to obtain the deed of feudal tenure on the morrow."

"The offer of a gold ring, mayhap?" asked Bernhard, jokingly.

"Nay," replied Albrecht; "Countess Oda is the coveted object for which she will grant me anything."

"Give her up, Albrecht! Thou canst not keep the maiden alone at Regenstein with thee."

"Why not?" asked the elder brother, with a frown. "I have promised her my protection, and I will not leave her without it."

"Have a care, Albrecht," pleaded Bernhard; "our foes are increasing by reason of this maiden, and I fear a hard struggle is in store for us."

"Yea; doubtless we shall soon have fighting enough," returned Count Albrecht.

"If thou wilt not surrender her to the abbess, let her come to us at Heimbург, and be under Reginhild's care," urged Bernhard.

"Nay," answered the other, shortly and sharply; "she remaineth where she is," and spurred on his horse so impatiently that Bernhard could not fail to notice it, and draw his own conclusions.

When they reached Regenstein, they observed upon the summit of the rocks a figure waving a scarf to them in friendly greeting. It was Oda. Both the brothers saw her, but neither made any observation, though a smile

came upon Albrecht's face, as he returned her salutation. Bernhard, on the other hand, appeared not to notice it, but looked down with an air of annoyance. The brothers separated at the foot of the hill, after a brief farewell, but neither felt satisfied with the other.

In his impatience, Albrecht urged his horse up the steep incline so that it panted for breath, and was so hot when his master rode him into the stable, that Schadow could hardly refrain from speaking, it was so contrary to the count's custom.

One was hidden from view on the slope of the hill by the trees, so that Oda only knew of Albrecht's arrival by the blast of the warder's horn.

She hurried down, and near the foot of the rocks she met Count Albrecht coming toward her. There she stood still, to recover her breath, with rosy cheeks and shining eyes.

"Siegfried sendeth thee greeting, Countess Oda," began Albrecht, as he offered her his hand; "and every evening at sunset he will stand on the watch-tower at Lauenburg and beckon hither, and he would fain thou shouldst stand on our rock and wave a salutation in return."

Instead of answering, Oda asked, quickly, "Art thou wounded, Count Albrecht?"

Albrecht laughed. "I have neither given nor received wounds. My sword hath remained in its sheath; we have captured the castle without bloodshed."

"Hast thou also seen the abbess?"

"I have, in good sooth."

"And how did ye part?"

"To speak truly, the parting was somewhat stormy," answered the count, with a peculiar intonation; "but I trust we shall soon be friends again."

They had slowly descended, and now met the old house-keeper.

"Let me have something to eat, Ursula," Albrecht called to her; "I am hungry."

"Wilt thou not take off thine armor?" asked Oda.

"In that case I must leave thee," he said, smiling, "and I have been away all day."

"I will wait," she said, slightly blushing; "and meantime Ursula will get ready *our* supper."

"*Our!* Hast thou not already eaten?"

"Nay," she answered; "I waited for thy return."

His eyes rested upon her for a moment, and then he said, "I will be with thee speedily," and went to his room.

The sun had now sunk nearly to the top of the Brocken, and the watch-tower's shadow lay quite across the courtyard. Oda paced to and fro, absorbed in her own thoughts.

When the count entered his chamber, he saw that some one had been there before him. His clothing, armor, weapons, and belongings of all kinds, which usually lay in confusion, were now in order, each in its proper place. As Count Albrecht looked about him he frowned at the unauthorized invasion, till a small jug of wild flowers caught his eye, which stood beside his inkhorn on the table. No one could have put it there but Oda. She had indeed gathered these flowers and placed them in Albrecht's room; at the same time, like a good fairy, putting everything to rights. It was she who had been thinking how to please his eye; it was her hand which had moved this knife, the spurs, and the old law-book, and which had finally arranged this fragrant little nose-gay to crown the work.

Albrecht took it in his hand, gazed at it, and put it

back where Oda had placed it. Now again he surveyed the chamber, but with a smile, as if pleased with its air of cheerful neatness, and a feeling of peaceful content reigned in the breast of the man who had just taken a fortress from a sovereign ruler, and openly defied her anger. He laid aside his armor, but instead of throwing it down at random, he carried it to his sleeping-room, and clothed himself in a close-fitting woollen tunic. Then he took the flowers and went into the court-yard to join Oda.

Heartily thanking the embarrassed girl, he took from the bunch of flowers a little spray of bluebells. "Permit me," he said, smiling; "the bluebells will well become thy dark hair."

Confused, she stood beside him while he carefully arranged the flowers. Then, fastening the rest of them upon his breast, they went to supper, but not until old Ursula had called them more than once.

The sun sank below the horizon. Yonder on the watch-tower of Lauenburg stood Siegfried, looking and longing, but his lily was not on the rocky height of Regenstein. She sat beneath with his brother, her heart full of joy, while Siegfried's ardent greeting flew over the castle like an arrow that has missed its mark and is lost forever.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN Master Willekin, who had not immediately received Jutta's message, finally appeared at the convent, he found the inmates in considerable excitement. In the court-yard, upon the steps, and in the passages he saw everywhere animated faces, and above, in one of the ante-rooms, he met the superior and deaconess with some of the younger ladies engaged in earnest conversation, but they could not explain to him exactly what had befallen.

Count Albrecht's exceptionally early visit, his prolonged stay, and his hasty departure had taken the castle by surprise. The abbess's waiting-woman and Florencius had been teased till the latter acknowledged that he had drawn up a deed giving the count Lauenburg in fief; and the former, who confessed to having listened, told them that he had quarrelled with the abbess, but that she only heard detached words and sentences, such as "shameful," "is this thy chivalry?" "slay my castellan," and the question, "Where is Oda?" Afterward, when her mistress rang, she had seen a torn parchment lying on the floor. Therefore, the conclusion was arrived at, that Count Albrecht had torn the deed in anger, but why, no one could divine.

Thus prepared for something unusual, the chancellor entered the abbess's room, she having refused to see any one else. He found her still hot with indignation, and in this mood she related to him how Count Albrecht had taken Lauenburg by storm, and installed his brother there as castellan.

Master Willekin must now counsel her what to do.

She said nothing whatever of the deed of feudal tenure, and the chancellor was inclined to doubt the story of the scrivener and the waiting-woman.

But it was highly important to him to know whether the abbess actually intended giving the too-powerful Von Regenstein the coveted castle, which the city of Quedlinburg so much desired.

"Gracious lady," he began, after short consideration, "permit me to ask one question. Dost thou wish to take the fortress altogether out of the hands of the Regensteins, or dost thou only wish to remove their castellan?"

The abbess was embarrassed, for the drawing up of the deed was an undeniable fact, proving her late intention of making over Lauenburg to Count Albrecht. She was obliged, therefore, to confess the truth, and answered, "I had certainly purposed giving Count von Regenstein tenure in fief of the castle of Lauenburg, but since he hath taken it by force, I am of another mind, and have commanded him to surrender it."

The chancellor thereupon stated that, notwithstanding the late disagreement between the lady abbess and the council of Quedlinburg, the latter was ready, if need were, to wrest the fortress from Count Albrecht, provided the city might retain it in fief. But it could hardly be effected without powerful allies.

"Are these to be found?" the abbess asked.

"I know of one," answered Master Willekin, "but thou hast made an enemy of him."

"The bishop of Halberstadt?" said she, quickly.

The chancellor assented.

"It would cost but a word to renew his friendship," she continued.

"Indeed!" replied Master Willekin, in gratified sur-

prise. "Hast thou any other complaint against the count, which might give the bishop a right to interfere?"

"Certainly! He keepeth Countess Oda von Falkenstein a prisoner at Regenstein, though her brother hath destined her for this convent, and committed her to my keeping, with a large dower. Count Albrecht refuseth to release her, though I have required of him that he should do so."

"I am aware of it," answered the chancellor, "and the bishop hath demanded it likewise."

"He hath his own reasons," said the abbess, "and I could call upon him to join with us, and through him we might secure Count Hoyer as an ally."

"But Count Albrecht hath his friends also," suggested the chancellor. "The Mansfelds and the other Hartz nobles. We can easily light a fire which will spread over the whole country."

"Let it spread, then!" cried Jutta, passionately. "I will have my rights! Dost thou believe that Count Albrecht will give up the castle, unless we use force? Let your Quedlinburgers take it from him, and compel him to yield Countess Oda to me, and ye shall have Lauenburg in fief!"

"I must go and consult my friends of the council, gracious lady," said Master Willekin, hastily, taking his leave, lest the capricious abbess should recall her words.

In the anteroom he found the superior and deaconess waiting for him, and he was obliged to tell them what had occurred. They wrung their hands in holy horror, and if the count's ears burned just then, it was not because of their praises.

As Master Willekin descended the steps, he said to himself, "I much wonder how long this storm will last. If Count Albrecht should come to-morrow, and give the abbess a few fair words, she would give him Lauenburg

on the spot, and garland it with roses to boot. Just now, to oust Siegfried and bring the Countess von Falkenstein into the convent, she would plunge the whole neighborhood into war. What doth it mean?"

The chancellor's dwelling was a manor-house in a somewhat retired part of the city, with a farm outside the walls attached to it. Through the latter ran a branch of the Bode. Hither he invited the most intimate friends of the councillors, including the first burgomaster, and acquainted them with what had happened.

His guests heard with satisfaction of the quarrel between the count and abbess, which they assumed must necessarily be to the advantage of the city. At the same time they were enraged at Count Albrecht's seizure of Lauenburg, recognizing the difficulty of securing it upon the abbess's conditions. They might succeed in storming the castle and driving out the obnoxious Siegfried, but how were they to carry off his brother's prisoner from the impregnable Regenstein? The reward, however, was tempting, and with powerful allies and the whole strength of the city, Count Albrecht might be overcome. Was it not for this that they had concluded their alliance with the bishop of Halberstadt? Never before had the prospect seemed so bright for throwing off the hated Regenstein yoke, and proudly asserting themselves as burghers of a free imperial city of the great Hanseatic League.

In the chancellor's shady arbor, around his hospitable board, the assembled councillors determined, under certain conditions, to declare war against the Regensteins. They agreed to summon the council together on the following morning, and each undertook to take part in inciting the burghers, especially the artisans, against their feudal chief. Whereupon, full of hope and courage, they took leave of their host.

That very evening the rest of the councillors and many citizens heard what had occurred. Exaggerated rumors were abroad, and the minds of the townsfolk were much exercised by the different reports.

Next morning the council came together. Much indignation was expressed against the Regensteins, nor did the abbess altogether escape, on account of her partiality for the count. But they were ready to forgive and forget, under the circumstances, and make common cause with her against him.

A few of the older councillors shook their heads and raised their warning voices in protest, but the majority were full of confidence, and eager for the struggle to begin. They had bowed beneath the yoke long enough. Quedlinburg was no petty hamlet, but, since King Heinrich's time, an important city, growing richer and stronger every day, with its own coinage, tolls, and right of holding fairs, as the armed statue of Roland in the market-place testified, he who had promised them the right of criminal jurisdiction, which had nevertheless thus far been denied. Here emperors had lived, — Heinrich, Otto, Barbarossa, and Philip of Swabia, — and here the Reichstag had met, and would they now let themselves be taxed and trampled upon by a mere robber count? They would bear it no longer! They were in no wise inferior to their neighbors of Halberstadt, who were happy and contented under the crosier of their bishop. They also cited Aschersleben, which had just been acquired by him; a little suddenly, perhaps, but had immediately been granted important privileges. They were willing to be on friendly terms with the princely abbess, so that she did not interfere with their municipal liberties, according to their oaths, but they must refuse to be any longer under the count's jurisdiction.

Thus they gave vent to their feelings, and showed plainly how they coveted the neighboring fortress. Happily the burgomaster had judgment and influence enough to restrain the council from over-haste. He reminded his hot-headed colleagues that Lauenburg was the property of the convent, and that they could not occupy it without the permission of the abbess; otherwise they would be following in Count Albrecht's footsteps.

They therefore resolved to go directly to the abbess, and ask her to authorize them to begin hostilities, as well as to solicit the bishop for a definite contingent of horse and foot, as soon as all was in readiness for an attack.

The sitting had been a secret one, but its purpose was intentionally made known to the whole community. Immediately the city was in a state of ferment. The timid were naturally frightened, but the courageous and public-spirited heartily rejoiced, and were eager to proceed directly to attack the fortress. To be revenged upon the robber count for every injury he had inflicted, for the cattle he had stolen, for every punishment he had imposed, to assault his castles, and close their own gates against him once for all, was the general desire. The name of the robber count resounded in every nook and corner.

The next day the guilds held their meetings, and they all agreed to offer their services to the council, and recommend that body to begin hostilities as soon as possible.

This was precisely what the councillors wished. They could now go to the abbess and inform her that it was the desire of the entire community to throw off their allegiance to Count Albrecht, and solicit her permission to besiege and occupy the fortress of Lauenburg. Her other condition, namely, that Countess Oda should be

removed from Regenstein and brought to the convent, had been kept secret by the chancellor's confidants.

Master Willekin had absented himself from the castle of Quedlinburg for two days, but the superior had informed herself as to all that was occurring below in the city, and painted it in lively colors for the benefit of the abbess. The latter had at first refused to see any of the chapter, but the superior, in consequence of her urgency, was finally admitted, ostensibly to offer consolation in this trying state of affairs, but really to discover the inmost feelings of the abbess, and to incite her against Count Albrecht.

Indeed, Jutta had sad moments, when her anger cooled and almost gave place to the old loyalty and affection. That her wrath might not die out, it was advisable to fan the flame a little, and the superior well understood this. She began by appearing to defend the count, but in such a way as to make Jutta more sensitive to the injury he had done her. Then she proceeded to blame her for her weakness, saying, "Why didst thou not follow my advice?"

Jutta impatiently shrugged her shoulders.

"I have always said," Kunigunde continued, "that thou wert spoiling the count. He taketh too much upon himself, and thou shouldst not submit to it."

She little knew what Jutta had last submitted to.

"Who will protect thee against this man?" the superior went on. "Thou hast vexed the bishop, because thou wouldst not assist at his consecration, sorely as I entreated thee. Solely for love of Count Albrecht — oh! I know it, though thou shakest thy head — didst thou not decline the bishop's invitation, simply because he had trodden too hard upon the count's foot? And what thanks hast thou? He does what he pleaseth, and laugheth at thee!"

The abbess started at these words, for they were only too true. The count had left her with a laugh, having Lauenburg in his power, and he had branded her forehead with his burning kiss. She bit her lips and said nothing to Kunigunde's reproaches, but let herself be rated like a child; she, the princess, and why? Ah! the count should atone for this, likewise! but when the sun sank, and she sat alone in the twilight, the noble form of Albrecht would appear to her in the gathering darkness, and she would dwell upon his tone and words until she was almost ready to give and forgive him everything. Even the memory of his audacious freedom when he left her was not so unbearable, as she thought of that moment when she was held in his strong arms and suddenly felt his kiss upon her brow. But then, alas! the sound of his light laugh rang again in her ears, reminding her that Siegfried had been sent to Lauenburg, and that Oda and Albrecht were together at Regenstein, perchance laughing together at the lonely abbess in her castle. Thus her wrath and resentment would return, while she determined to steel her heart against all relenting.

But Kunigunde took good care that she should not be too much alone, and more than once she repeated her exhortations. She sang the same old tune, and her wrinkled face forcibly expressed her indignation at Count Albrecht's conduct, always concluding her sermon by adjuring Jutta to hand down unimpaired to her successors the powers and privileges which she had herself received.

It was during one of these lectures that Master Willekin von Herrkestorf arrived at the convent with the first burgomaster and two of the councillors, and begged for an interview with the abbess.

She advanced to meet the representatives of the council with her usual dignity, while they in return made her

profound salutations. The burgomaster, Nikolaus von Bekheim, after a brief account of the state of affairs in the city, informed her that it was the purpose of the council, with her gracious permission, to take Lauenburg by force and to throw off their allegiance to Count von Regenstein.

For the first time in her life, Jutta was obliged to decide for herself a most important question. When she heard these serious and courageous men propose to attempt an undertaking which she had suggested, she was suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of great responsibility. Her plans for revenge, in the face of stern reality and of undertakings fraught with untold results, seemed now a foolhardy trifling with danger. She was like a dreamer suddenly awakened, who finds himself on the brink of an abyss. Past and future were united in the present, and while now she looked at everything in a new light, she saw no way of escape. Pondering deeply, she turned from one to the other of these men, who waited expectantly for her answer, and whose manner betrayed only resolute determination.

Nikolaus von Bekheim was a fine-looking man, with large, bright eyes and shapely head, his erect carriage and appearance of vigor contrasting singularly with his snow-white hair. Werner Scheerenschmid, one of the councillors, with his slender figure and austere face, impressed one as a man of shrewdness and reserve. The other, Henning Wollrabe, was a genuine, fair-haired Saxon, with ruddy complexion and broad shoulders, spirited and intrepid, and at the same time with a quiet assurance of manner. He belonged to an old Quedlinburg family, but owed his place in the council even more to his wealth than to his other advantages.

The abbess's situation was one of some difficulty as she

sat confronting these representatives of Quedlinburg, all eager for independence, and, moreover, in a highly irritable state of mind. If she granted the council's request, she gave the signal for hostilities over which she could have no control; and if she refused, the city would in all probability dispense with her consent, and go to war with the count, regardless of her wishes or rights. These reflections passed swiftly through her mind, while with grace and dignity, and at the same time with firmness, she said, —

“Good sirs! we will endeavor to settle this affair presently, in the best way possible. We are most unwilling to plunge our good city of Quedlinburg into strife and bloodshed, or to give permission for war against its feudal chief. We know well that ye bring many complaints against the count, and that ye would be rid of burdens which we would gladly see removed without detracting from princely prerogatives. We stand between the town and our noble protector, and would fain do justice to both, according to the laws and customs of our ancestors; but as we desire to take counsel in this matter, and his Imperial Majesty is too distant, we will consult the reverend bishop of Halberstadt, and thereupon come to a decision.”

Now this certainly sounded different from all which she had said to the chancellor in the first ebullition of her wrath. But at present she felt differently, and by speaking thus she hoped still to hold the sword in her own hand, and remain for the present mistress of the situation. The representatives of the council were not quite satisfied with her speech, neither were they altogether dissatisfied. After the chancellor's communication, they looked for a more definite reply, but the abbess's proposal to consult the bishop, the city's secret ally and the bitter

enemy of the count, was gratifying, and from such consultation they anticipated only favorable results.

The chancellor was of the same opinion, and seeing that the restless superior was about to interfere, he besought her by signs, which fortunately she heeded, to be silent.

"May we inform our fellow-citizens, noble princess, of thy decision?" asked Nikolaus von Bekheim.

"Surely, Burgomaster," answered the abbess, "ye may say this to the other councillors, the guild masters, and our good friends, the townsfolk."

"And wilt thou acquaint us with the bishop's advice, gracious lady?" inquired Master Werner Scheerenschmid, with a scrutinizing look at the abbess.

"We will not keep you in ignorance of our resolution, Master Councillor," she replied, evasively. "To-morrow I purpose to ride to Halberstadt. Thou wilt accompany me, Master Willekin, and I shall ask for a small guard of horsemen, Burgomaster!"

"They are always at thy service, my lady," replied the worthy magistrate.

"We are ready to protect thee with our lives, if need be, noble lady, from any danger that may threaten thee!" cried Henning Wollrabe, warmly.

"I thank thee, Master Henning; ye have my best wishes for the welfare of our good town."

Jutta said this smiling, and with a friendly inclination of the head, for she wished to appear to these gentlemen of the council not only as princess, but as a charming woman, whom they could not find it in their hearts to resist.

She seldom failed to make such an impression as she wished upon all men folk, and thus to-day the representatives of the city of Quedlinburg took their leave, charmed

with her grace and beauty, and forgetting that they had really obtained nothing by their visit. She had promised, it is true, to ask the bishop's advice, but not to follow it.

The superior slipped out of the room with the chancellor, and Jutta was left alone, her heart eased, after painful days, by a feeling of comparative calmness and content.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALTHOUGH Count Albrecht immediately received news of the ferment in Quedlinburg, he only laughed at it, believing it would all come to naught.

For him, however, now began a different and a far more difficult warfare than that which the city threatened. It was with his own heart and conscience that he was now called upon to struggle. Albrecht loved Oda von Falkenstein, and he knew it. It had become evident to him the evening when he had put flowers in Oda's hair. From that moment he was conscience-stricken, as he thought of his brother Siegfried, with whose love for the maiden he was only too well acquainted, and whose hopes he had himself encouraged. Now that he was aware of his own desires, he was horror-struck; he felt himself a traitor, and resolved at once to renounce her utterly, without reflecting that, perhaps, his resolution would tax even his strength beyond its endurance.

When he met Oda, after a sleepless night, he avoided her gaze as if oppressed by guilt, and spoke to her as little as possible. Directly after breakfast he ordered his horse, then threw himself into the saddle, and set out alone, hoping thus to ease his mind. He rode on as in a dream, without noticing where he went, lost in thought, hearing nothing, seeing nothing. Every day, every hour, every moment since Oda's arrival at Regenstein was recalled, not forgetting her last "good-night," which was followed — he could not deceive himself — by a soft pressure of the hand. She did not suspect that he loved her, he thought

He had as yet done nothing on her behalf, but she had implicit faith in his promises of assistance, and this must be why she was friendly, and perhaps, also, because he was Siegfried's brother. Why should any other feeling spring up in her young heart? And how could he be guilty of such unpardonable folly, such wickedness, as to fall in love with the pale lily, Siegfried's destined bride?

He sighed deeply, and straightened himself in the saddle, then twitching the bridle, and making his horse start as if on the brink of a precipice, he found himself close to the walls of Quedlinburg without at all knowing how he had come thither, and above him towered the abbess's castle.

Brun had brought him back by the same road over which he had ridden yesterday. Was the noble animal guided by some mysterious instinct? Should he return to the abbess, make his peace with her, and freely surrender the fortress of Lauenburg, giving her the opportunity to bestow it upon him in fief, as she had purposed? Count Albrecht was not free from superstition, and horse, hound, and hawk were to him silent friends, in whose sagacity he had full faith. Had his trusty beast again decided for him, indicating the way he should go?

As he reasoned thus with himself, it was possible that Jutta's bright eyes might discover him from her window; but he did not trouble himself as to her opinion of his appearance here.

Ah! should she now look into his heart, and see there that which she had jealously taxed him with, and which he had then honestly denied, — his love for Oda!

Had his horse, then, brought him here, that he might make an apology, and acknowledge that, after all, Jutta was right?

He patted the animal's neck and stroked his mane.

"What thinkest thou, Brun?" he said. "Shall we go to my lady, and make our peace?"

Brun nodded his head.

"Ha! Brun! Thou knowest her not; thou hast never quarrelled with her, nor looked into her great, dark eyes when they burned! What if I should go to her now, and offer her my hand and heart? Then I should be irrevocably bound, and saved from the folly against which I am so weak. This would guard the maiden and Siegfried from my madness. A word to the beautiful abbess, and all is done! Shall we go up, Brun?"

Brun shook his head till his chain and bridle rattled.

"Thou wilt not go? Thou wilt not have the proud Jutta for thy mistress?" cried the count, joyfully. "Come, let us return, and see what Oda is doing!"

But, instead of turning, the horse began to paw the ground.

"What, dost wish me to attack this froward little city, break down its walls, and challenge the burgher rabble before they throw down the gauntlet? Not now, Brun. Come, come! Oda is alone at home!"

He turned his bay and trotted back, keeping his eyes fixed on Regenstein, thinking that perchance Oda's slender figure might appear again upon its rocky height. And as he rode over the drawbridge, the seizure of Lauenburg, the abbess's anger, the enmity of the Blankenburgs and of the townsfolk were all forgotten; but he locked his secret in the recesses of his heart, so that Oda might suspect nothing. No pressure of the hand, no tender word, no glance betrayed his love for her; yet the prolonged struggle with himself gave him little rest or peace, and the next day he swung himself again into the saddle, to reason with himself in solitude, where Oda's questioning eyes could

not pursue him ; to do what he had failed in doing yesterday, — decide upon his course.

At the foot of Regenstein, Brun wished to take the road to Quedlinburg once more ; but this time the count chose to go his own way, and, turning the wilful beast, he rode by the Michaelstein monastery, up the valley of the Goldbach. As the narrow pathway became steeper, and his way was impeded by low-hanging branches, Count Albrecht dismounted, fastened his horse, and threw himself upon the ground in the shade of a beech-tree. Not a leaf was stirring, and only the song of birds broke the silence of the forest.

But even here disturbed thoughts swarmed through his mind like gnats in the sunshine, and when he tried to set them in order, a doubt began to dawn upon him which grew more and more definite, and which he could not shake off.

The more sure he was of Siegfried's love for Oda, the less certain he felt that Oda returned it. He must know the truth, and reluctantly confessed to himself that this doubt brought with it a gleam of hope.

But how should he sound Oda's heart? The soldierly knight was versed in military strategy, but he little knew how to surprise a woman's secret. Therefore, he determined to wait till chance should reveal it to him, and when he discovered that she loved Siegfried, he would ask Jutta's hand, and be to her a faithful husband, and to Oda an affectionate brother-in-law. As head of his family, he felt it simply a duty to marry and give Regenstein a mistress. He had received sufficient proof of Jutta's love, notwithstanding their quarrels. Her passionate nature attracted him, and her wit and beauty were such that he persuaded himself, if need were, he could learn to love this captivating creature.

So in the solitude of the forest he arrived at a decision which satisfied his conscience, and restored to him so much peace of mind as would enable him to attend to affairs which greatly required his care.

Thereupon he rode back to Regenstein, and found his sister-in-law with Oda. It occurred to him at once to take Reginhild aside, tell her everything, and ask for her advice and assistance, for he loved her heartily, and had confidence in her clear judgment and kindly feeling. But when she looked at him as if she would read his thoughts, his resolution failed, and he was ashamed to confess that he, the mature man, was held by the self-same fetters which bound the young Siegfried.

He might, however, have spared himself his apprehensions, for Reginhild gave him advice unasked, having come to Regenstein for this very purpose.

Oda's feeling for Albrecht, which Reginhild had discovered, gave her much pain on Siegfried's account, and when Bernhard, on his return from Lauenburg, related how Siegfried had been sent there as castellan, and how his own suggestion, that Oda should go to the convent, had been summarily rejected, she feared that Albrecht would become dearer to her, while Siegfried would be forgotten. She imagined, from Albrecht's persistent refusal to part with the young countess, that he had taken a passing fancy to the latter, as she regarded Jutta von Kranichfeld as future mistress of Regenstein. Siegfried's happiness must not be destroyed for the elder brother's passing whim, and, therefore, it was desirable that the former should soon return, and it was to bring this about that she had come to Regenstein, with Bernhard's approval.

After a sisterly greeting, she began, as if speaking for her husband. Disturbing rumors had come to him of the state of affairs in Quedlinburg, and of the town's intention to besiege Lauenburg.

Bernhard begged his brother to remember that Siegfried, with all his courage, was too young and inexperienced to be responsible for the castle, under these circumstances, and he advised Albrecht to recall him, and put an older man in his place.

Reginhild's words dropped like a plummet into the hearts of both her hearers, and the clever woman was on the alert to see their effect, both upon Albrecht and Oda.

The count was taken by surprise, but he saw that the suggestion was a wise one, and that this would be a good test of Oda's feelings. If she cared for Siegfried, she would show pleasure at the prospect of his return, and then he would know what to do.

Bernhard's advice concerning Lauenburg certainly seemed judicious. But Albrecht, conscious of his love, was sure that some hidden design lay behind it, and suspected what it was. He could not, however, refuse to remove Siegfried, without creating the suspicion that he had sent him away to be rid of him. But he would temporize, and thus the better discover what Oda's feelings were.

Oda also heard Reginhild's proposal with a troubled conscience, while she listened intently to Albrecht's reply, without betraying in the least her own wishes in the matter. All three were, in fact, carefully watching one another.

"Bernhard is right," answered Albrecht, after a short pause. "I will send Harder, of Derenburg, to his aid; a true and trusty man. But I do not wish to recall him, immediately after intrusting him with the command of which he seemed so proud. Dost thou not agree with me, Countess Oda?"

"He said nothing to me of his pleasure, when he left us," she replied; "but what young knight would not enjoy such a trust?"

"Thou canst not leave Siegfried at Lauenburg, after thou sendest Harder thither," remarked Reginhild. "It is not suitable for a Regenstein to be second in authority, and under his own vassal. The garrison ought not to know why the young castellan is withdrawn; thou shouldst give him some other than the real reason."

"It will doubtless be a mortification to him," said Count Albrecht. "He will never allow that he cannot command as well as another."

"I am sure he will acknowledge it, brother, if thou puttest it in a favorable light. Ask him if he would not return to Regenstein, rather than be only in nominal command of Lauenburg. Am I not right, dear Oda?"

"I think thou art, Countess Reginhild," Oda answered.

And Count Albrecht agreed with her. He heard in his sister-in-law's words a covert plea for Siegfried, and for his own part the voice of conscience loudly appealed to him. With a strong effort, then, he put self aside, and exclaimed, "Thou hast convinced me, Reginhild! Siegfried shall come home."

No joyful light came into Oda's eyes as he uttered these words, but she cast them down, and he could learn nothing of her thoughts.

Reginhild recognized the sacrifice which he made for Siegfried, and returned in good spirits to Heimbург, with the same respect which she had always felt for her brother-in-law's sense of honor and goodness of heart. Later, when Albrecht sat alone in his room, he felt vexed with himself that he had not thought of sending for Siegfried, without waiting for Bernhard and Reginhild to persuade him. For the first time in his life he felt humiliated before his brother and sister, and the thought was not a pleasant one.

Discontented with himself, he summoned Bock, and said to him, —

“Listen, Bock! Our good lady abbess hath expressed a desire that no Regenstein shall command the fortress of Lauenburg. For this cause,—dost thou hear, Bock?—for this cause, I have determined to send Harder, of Derenburg, to take Count Siegfried’s place. To-morrow morning I wish thee to ride with three men to Derenburg, give him my orders, and escort him to Lauenburg. The next day thou canst return to Regenstein with my brother. Dost understand why Harder is to relieve Siegfried?”

“Because the abbess wisheth what we all wish, that Count Siegfried should remain here with Countess Oda,” replied Bock, with a knowing smile.

“Thou art out of thy wits!” cried the count, with a red face. “I told thee, because she doth not choose to have a Regenstein castellan there. Now repeat it after me!”

Bock repeated it, word for word.

“Now, stick to that, and make no stupid blunder. Start early in the morning, and be on thy guard against the Quedlinburgers; they will show thee no sort of civility. Bring back no plunder. Dost hear, Bock?”

“H’m! ’T is a pity!” muttered Bock; “but if I get hold of Schabernack, Sir Count—”

“Thou canst question him as shrewdly as thou didst the other day,” laughed Count Albrecht.

Bock bit his long mustache.

“All shall be done as thou commandest, Sir Count,” said he, shortly leaving the room.

His master had not enjoined silence, and the news of Siegfried’s expected return was soon communicated to every soul in the castle, for he knew they would all rejoice. He wished especially to inform Eilika. He found her seated in an arbor, occupied with needle-work. She had seen him coming, but seemed much surprised as

his tall figure, bent almost double, appeared in the low entrance. He seated himself beside her on the bench, without much ado, and thus began, —

“What wilt thou give me, gentle maiden, if I give thee pleasant tidings?”

“That dependeth upon whether they are pleasant to thee or to me.”

“I should think that what would please me must please thee,” he said, with a self-satisfied air; “but guess what it is, Mistress Eilika.”

“Well, then, thou art  on a long journey,” said she, maliciously.

“And would that please thee?” he asked, with a reproachful look; “but if thou callest two days a long time, thou art right.”

“Two whole days? I shall be inconsolable, Sir Knight!” she cried.

“Now that pleaseth me! But guess whom I am to bring back with me!” urged Bock.

“Not Count Siegfried?”

“What a sharp wit thou hast!” exclaimed the knight.
“One cannot surprise thee!”

“Hath Count Albrecht so ordered it?” asked Eilika.

“Surely! Who else? Tell me, Mistress Eilika, hath the countess pined for our dear young master? Perchance she hath told Count Albrecht that she would fain have him return.”

“Oh, Sir Knight, how canst thou think so!” Eilika retorted.

“Why, thou seest, the count never of himself changeth his mind. And as to the abbess, I believe naught of it.”

“What of the abbess?”

“Count Albrecht saith that the abbess wisheth no Regenstein to be castellan at Lauenburg, and to gratify

her he is going to send Harder, of Derenburg, to relieve his brother."

"I think Count von Regenstein would do anything to please the abbess," said Eilika.

"So it is thought; and, between ourselves, the abbess may yet be mistress of Regenstein."

"Is it so?" said Eilika. "And she will not have her future brother-in-law remain at Lauenburg? There must be some cause for that."

"Thy mistress is the cause," returned Bock.

Eilika shook her head. "Why, nay; I truly believe it is the abbess's doing."

"Because she wisheth thy countess and our young count to wed one another. I said so likewise, but I got a fine answer from the count"; and Bock made a grimace.

"What said he to thee?"

"He told me I had gone clean out of my wits."

Eilika laughed aloud.

"This time he did thee injustice, Sir Knight. But now I will hear what my mistress hath to say to it."

She rose, and gathered up her sewing materials.

"What we have been speaking of, Sir Knight, is between ourselves," said she; "can I rely upon thee?"

"I give thee my word of honor, dear maiden," answered Bock, ponderously; "thy confidence is to me a very fountain of delight." Whereupon, he carried her hand to his lips, and walked slowly back to the castle by the side of the coquettish maiden.

"I have brought thee good news, my lady! Count Siegfried is to return!" exclaimed Eilika, as she entered her mistress's room.

Oda looked up sadly. "Why callest thou this good news, Eilika?"

“And art thou not glad of it?” asked her maid.

The young countess shook her head.

“But I thought —” And Eilika stopped, and looked doubtfully at her mistress.

“Thou thinkest what the others think,” said Oda.

“Why, my lady! A young knight like Count Siegfried, handsome, brave, and courtly, and a Regenstein! Hast thou not seen that he loveth thee dearly?”

“Do not speak of it!” answered Oda, with a sigh.

“Eilika, I have no one to whom I can unburden my heart; I will confide in thee. They wish me to become Count Siegfried’s wife; Count Albrecht, Countess Reginhild, and — I know it well — Count Siegfried himself most of all.”

“And the abbess,” added Eilika.

“The abbess! She wisheth it also!” cried Oda, astonished.

“Certainly. It is owing to her that Count Siegfried is to return,” the maid went on.

“Thou art mistaken,” said Oda. “Count Bernhard desireth that an older and more experienced man should command Lauenburg. Countess Reginhild said so in my presence.”

“In thy presence!” repeated Eilika, smiling. “Naturally, my lady, they would not tell thee the true reason. But depend upon it, it is the work of the abbess. She hath made use of Countess Reginhild as of Count Albrecht.”

“Who told thee so?” asked her mistress, indignantly.

“The Knight Bock said so.”

“Oh! And what knoweth he of the matter?”

“He hath it from Count Albrecht’s own mouth.”

“From Count Albrecht!” repeated Oda, shocked.

“Certainly! Count Albrecht told him that Count Sieg-

fried was to return, because the abbess wished it; and that the Knight Bock should ride to Lauenburg and fetch him," Eilika went on glibly. "Count Albrecht doth whatever the abbess desireth, because she is one day to be mistress of Regenstein. Dost thou not know that?"

Oda only half heard her maid's gossip, but at these last words she started, and the blood left her cheeks until they became paler than lilies.

"Let her have Regenstein!" Eilika continued. "Thou canst go to Lauenburg with Count Siegfried. Knight Bock saith it is grand there; a lordly castle upon a steep hill in the midst of the forest, like an eagle's nest. And wouldst thou have a change? thou canst go to Falkenstein, my lady, for the Regensteins have sworn, Knight Bock telleth me, that thou shalt not lose thine inheritance. Surely Count Siegfried will not let his lady be deprived of such a castle as Falkenstein. Such a knight as he, who would not love!"

"Eilika, hath the abbess set thee also upon me?" cried Oda, impatiently.

"There is no need of that, my lady! There is not a soul in Regenstein who would not heartily wish that thou mightst wed Count Siegfried. And thou promised to confide in me. Do so, my dear lady! I would go through fire for thy sake. Tell me only that thou lovest Count Siegfried!"

"Thou meanest well, Eilika," said Oda, extending her hand to the maid. "I love Count Siegfried as a dear friend and brother, but in no other way."

"It will all come in time, dear mistress," laughed Eilika. "Begin with the sisterly love; the other will soon follow. He is coming the day after to-morrow; be kind to him, Countess Oda; he surely deserveth thy love!"

"I will try, my good Eilika! I will strive to love him,

since Count Albrecht wisheth it, but —" And she finished the sentence with a sigh.

When later in the evening Eilika encountered Bock at the stables, he immediately asked her, —

"Pray, what did thy mistress say, when she heard Count Siegfried was to come back to us?"

"I am sure she loveth him," answered Eilika, "only she will not confess it."

"Might I tell him so to-morrow?" inquired Bock.

"It could do no harm to give him a hint."

"H'm! I will take care of it!" he replied.

As the pair walked on side by side, he whispered, softly, —

"I believe, dear maiden, thou hast left thy thimble in the arbor; let us go together and find it."

"I believe, Sir Knight, thou hast left thy wits in the arbor," answered Eilika, giving his long mustache a tweak; "go and find it by thyself!"

And with a little laugh, she slipped away in the darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was at an unusually early hour that the provost of the cathedral, Jordan von Donfus, entered Bishop Albrecht's apartment, and, in reply to the latter's surprised inquiry, exclaimed, —

"The abbess of Quedlinburg cometh this afternoon, reverend lord, to make thee a visit!"

"Abbess Jutta?" cried the bishop, incredulously! "Jordanus, what merry partaker of Herbord Moor's excellent wine hath told thee this fairy tale?"

"At my age one believeth not fairy tales," said the provost, "though I heard the tidings from Herbord Moor himself. The chancellor sent the news to his friend; I read the letter with my own eyes. The Abbess Jutta is coming to see thee to-day."

The bishop stood up. "Jordanus, is the cathedral still standing?"

"I asked myself the same question, when I heard the news," observed the provost.

"What can she desire?" said the bishop, half to himself, as he walked to and fro, pondering the matter. "Hath she quarrelled with the Regensteins, or cometh she as mediator between them and me?"

"Certainly not the latter, with the count's knowledge," answered the provost. "And — wouldst thou allow me to counsel thee? do not tell her that thou hast threatened Count von Regenstein with excommunication."

"I understand, Jordanus," said the bishop, in a tone of annoyance. "It was a mistake, a great mistake."

The provost shook his head solemnly. "One should never threaten what one cannot or will not perform."

"Thou art right; I was too hasty," returned the bishop. "If I could only conjecture what the capricious abbess wisheth of me! When I politely invited her, she refused to come; and now, when no one dreamed of seeing her, she maketh her appearance."

"She must not know that the chancellor hath privately informed us of her coming," remarked the provost. "If she beggeth anything of thee, thou canst require something of her in return."

"I trust she may come, Jordanus!"

"And do not let her cross this threshold unsatisfied, reverend sir," urged Jordan.

A peculiar smile flitted over the bishop's face, but he said nothing. The provost bowed, and slowly left the room.

"The old man is right; one should not indulge in vain threats," the bishop said to himself, when he was alone; "neither in vain requests. But hot blood floweth in her veins. *'Fortes fortuna juvat!'*"

Two days after, at mid-day, the abbess's *cortege* rode between the bishop's guard, drawn up on either side, to the gloomy rambling fortress, its court-yard enclosed by high walls. Master Willekin von Herrkestorf helped Countess Jutta to alight from her richly caparisoned palfrey, and two ecclesiastics conducted her up the stairway and through the porch to the vaulted corridor. There the bishop himself met her, offered her his hand, and led her into the same room in which the interview with the chancellor took place, when he brought the news of Jutta's refusal to attend the consecration.

On the way hither the abbess had been quiet and serious, giving only short answers to the lively talk of the

chancellor, who much feared that she might change her mind, even now.

The old city, with its massive ramparts and marshy moat, its embattled parapet and sturdy towers, even stronger than those of Quedlinburg, looked gloomy and forbidding. Armed to the teeth, as it were, it seemed to threaten all who approached, and when she reached the Kühlinger gate, the abbess would fain have turned back had she not promised the council to confer with the bishop of Halberstadt. As she passed through the long, dimly lighted passage, her heart almost failed her. She felt as if destiny were leading her by dark ways which she should never retrace. She was obliged to rehearse all that Count Albrecht had done to displease her, lest she should not adhere to her purpose, and it was not until she entered the bishop's handsomely appointed and well-lighted apartment, that she regained her self-possession and her original resolve. The bishop closed the door and dropped a heavy curtain over it, so that no eavesdropper could overhear what was said within. He was now alone with the abbess. Upon the table, between a comfortable folding chair and a cushioned bench, stood a silver dish of confections, and two great bowls of magnificent roses, which filled the room with fragrance.

"Didst thou expect me, my lord?" asked the abbess, looking at the table.

"Day by day, Countess Jutta," answered the bishop; "as one expecteth the bright sun after stormy days."

He had led her to the cushioned settle, and seated himself opposite her. She threw aside her mantle, and her temporarily secular dress set off the perfect beauty of her figure to great advantage. She wore a closely fitting blue robe, with hanging sleeves, lined with white silk open from the elbows. The tight under-sleeves were

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amber-colored. The abbess's cross hung by a golden chain from her neck ; at her waist she wore a costly girdle, and in her dark hair a jewelled diadem. The bishop's unfeigned admiration was not lost upon her.

"If thou hast confidently expected me," she said, with an air of surprise, "thou must also know why I come."

"If I do know or conjecture it, my lady, I would yet prefer to hear it from thine own gracious lips."

"Count von Regenstein hath insulted me, and I have come to consult thee as to how he can be compelled to respect my rights," answered the abbess, with a slight tremulousness of voice.

However the bishop might inwardly rejoice, there was no sign of it in his face, and he only bowed assentingly as if he had known it beforehand.

"Heretofore, my lady, thou hast chosen to follow the advice of the haughty count, rather than that of thy friend of the old days in Friedrich's court," he said, reproachfully ; "but I hope thou hast not forgotten that thou canst rule me with a glance, if thou wilt. As thou hast been so friendly to the count, he surely owes thee every respect, and I should greatly blame thee for suffering him to return thy favors with insult and ingratitude."

"Count Albrecht is the protector of the convent," said the abbess, embarrassed ; "otherwise he would have had no favors from me."

"I consoled myself with that thought, fair princess," rejoined the bishop. "But how thinkest thou that I can help thee against the count?"

"Not help, so much as counsel," suggested Jutta. "I wish thy advice concerning Lauenburg. Count Albrecht seized it without my knowledge, and hath given the command to his brother, to which I will not submit. I wish to have no Regenstein there ; least of all, Siegfried."

"Least of all, Siegfried!" repeated the bishop. "Hath he also aggrieved thee?"

"Nay, but —" She stopped and hesitated.

"But thou dost not wish him at Lauenburg?"

"I said so," she replied, impatiently. "Leutfred is dead; and I would like now to invest Count Albrecht or the city of Quedlinburg with the castle, but —"

"I would give it to neither," said the bishop, quickly, "for they are both too powerful already for our well-being."

"But only upon one condition," the abbess continued, without noticing the interruption.

"And pray what may that be?"

The abbess hesitated and looked at her shapely gold-embroidered shoes, which happened to peep from beneath her robe. "Thou knowest that Count Albrecht, despite my pressing remonstrances, is resolved to detain Countess Oda at Regenstein, and her release is the one condition upon which I will part with Lauenburg."

"Knowest thou Count Albrecht's reason for keeping possession of the Countess von Falkenstein?" asked the bishop.

The abbess looked at him keenly, as if pondering how far it was safe to trust him. "The count hath informed me that he hopeth Countess Oda may wed his brother Siegfried."

"And then sendeth him away from her to Lauenburg!" exclaimed the bishop. "Strange! Most strange! My lady, believest thou this?"

"Nay! It is naught but an excuse!" cried the abbess, indignantly.

"Thou thinkest, then, that he only wisheith to get possession of the demesne."

"With the countess!" cried Jutta, excitedly; "and

thou must not allow it, for I know that it hath been promised thee."

The bishop bit his lips, to suppress an exclamation at the happy discovery which had just been made to him.

The abbess had completely betrayed herself. It was jealousy of Oda which had driven her to Halberstadt, and prepared her to take this step against her disloyal friend and his sworn enemy. So reasoned the crafty bishop. And further, if the count had deserted her, he would now have an opportunity to win her favor, for which he eagerly longed. On this account, it would be for his interest that Siegfried should remain at Lauenburg and Oda at Regenstein. But the earldom! If either Albrecht or Siegfried married her, her inheritance would never be suffered to pass into other hands. It was difficult to give advice. Desire for Falkenstein, which Count Hoyer had promised him, as well for the beautiful woman who now sat so near him in all her charms, struggled for mastery in the breast of the passionate and ambitious churchman, and his rage increased against Count Albrecht, who had so often crossed his path. But at this moment neither his foe nor the fortress of Falkenstein were before his eyes, but only the fascinating Jutta, who appeared to him doubly attractive in her anger, and whom, through her thirst for retaliation, he hoped the more easily to win.

After a long pause, he began, —

"I fail to discover, my dear abbess, in what way I can right thee. I have also demanded in vain the release of the Countess Oda, in the name of her brother. It appeareth to me that the maiden doth not wish to leave Regenstein, for she is allowed perfect freedom, and still she doth not choose to go to the . Thy suspicion is, therefore, not unfounded; and the best counsel I can give thee is to trouble thyself no more about her, but enjoy thy youth

while thou canst, and gladden with thy beauty those who know how to appreciate thee better than thy cold-blooded, purblind protector."

He accompanied these words with looks of admiration, and Jutta returned his glance with an enchanting smile.

"Duke Albrecht," said she, "thou art the same flatterer in the bishop's violet robe that thou wert formerly at Wartburg in thy gold-embroidered page's doublet."

"How can one help it, sitting opposite the most beautiful woman in the Holy Empire? The landgravine, Mathilde's former page, often recalleth the happy hours he passed by the side of her dark-haired maid of honor. Let us be good friends again, and, under the veil of secrecy, become one in heart and soul!"

"An original thought, my good lord! A bishop and an abbess hidden together under the veil of secrecy!" laughed Jutta.

"What could we not accomplish together, if we had the will!" he exclaimed, gazing fixedly at her.

"And the power," added she.

"The power! And art thou not aware of the boundless sway of thy captivating beauty?" cried the bishop.

She looked at him for a moment, as if considering whether or not she should test her power over him. Then bending her head over the roses on the table, she closed her eyes, and deeply inhaled their perfume, as if she would yield herself to their intoxication.

"More charming than roses, thou transporteth me to the seventh heaven!" And the bishop seized her hand and carried it to his lips.

"Remain upon earth! Thou art not yet ready for heaven, I fear, dear friend," said she, with a smile which set his brain in a whirl.

"The only heaven I would know is that into which thou canst admit me! Countess Jutta, a word from thee, and my wish and thine are fulfilled!"

"What wish is that, Duke Albrecht?"

"To make Count Albrecht feel how he hath wronged thee."

She said, half to herself, —

"He hath never made me any pledges!"

"But your names have long been coupled, and he boasteth of thy love for him," answered the bishop.

"It is not possible!" she cried, reddening. "I have given him no cause to say such things!"

"So much the more shame to him! He hath used thee basely; hath let thee hope, and wait, and all the while hath never thought of making thee his. How doth it suit thee to be called the rejected Jutta?"

The abbess was about to rise up, wrathfully, but his gaze held her spell-bound. She sat there trembling with agitation, while the bishop watched her, lynx-like, to observe the effect of his lies.

Finally, she shook her head, and said, resolutely, —

"It is not possible! Thou doeth him injustice!"

"Thou defendeth him still?" said the bishop, with a cynical smile. "Well, thou shouldst know what he thinketh of thee, and, mayhap — Countess Oda —"

"Oda!"

"Yes, Oda, who is with him at Regenstein, and to whom, perchance, he boasteth of thy favor."

"Ah! if I were sure of that!" muttered the abbess.

"How canst thou doubt it? I would avenge myself, if I were thou, instead of sighing; and thou hast only to speak the word."

"How wouldst thou avenge me?" she asked, quickly.

"That shall be my care, but I shall claim my reward;

and as I shall hesitate at nothing, thou shouldst refuse me nothing," he answered, in a low voice.

She looked at him a moment, as if endeavoring to grasp the meaning of his words. Then, frightened at his expression, she suddenly realized that he was leading her to the brink of an abyss.

"Nay, Bishop Albrecht!" she said, rising quickly. "I did not desire this, when I asked for counsel!"

"I am ready to aid thee in all things," he continued. "Believe me, the count is dangerous to us both, and he is merely trifling with thee. Let us make a compact: united, we shall be invincible. Let the faithless count go! Forget him, as he hath forgotten thee! In this breast beateth a heart which is thine. Ah! Jutta, how happy we might be together, wert thou only willing."

She drew back alarmed, and putting up her hands as if in defence, she cried, —

"Nay; I will make no compact with thee! Rather would I myself protect the count against thee!"

"Against me?" and he gave her a searching glance. "Dost thou repulse thy truest ally? Wouldst thou wear the robber count's fetters rather than enjoy life with him who hath always adored thee?"

"I wear no one's fetters, nor will I wear thine!" she answered.

"Thou indulgest hopes that will never be fulfilled," said the bishop, decidedly. "Cast them aside, lest thou art forced to acknowledge thyself betrayed and forsaken. Bow not down to a deceitful idol."

"Thinkest thou it would be easier for me to bow down before thee?"

"If I obtain what thou wishest and gratify thy desires, I have a right to demand somewhat," returned the bishop.

"Demand where thou canst exact payment! I owe thee nothing!"

“Who desireth revenge, thou or I?” he asked, with knitted brow.

“Not I!” she replied, vehemently. “I came to thee on behalf of the town council, which wisheth to free itself from Count Albrecht, and hopeth for thine aid!”

“Since when hast thou constituted thyself the ambassador of the burgomaster and council?” asked the bishop, sarcastically.

“Thou knowest why I came. Wert thou not expecting me?”

“Yes; but not on their behalf. What care I for the quarrel between Quedlinburg and its fendal chief? Let them rid themselves of him as they can! It appeareth to me that thou art most concerned about the young Countess von Falkenstein,” he observed, with a sardonic smile.

“I wished advice also on that score,” said the abbess, reddening; “but I do not buy it, my lord,” she added, defiantly.

“Well, then, listen to my counsel,” answered Bishop Albrecht, coolly, while a scornful expression played about his mouth. “Allow the admirable count to keep the castle; perchance he may take the city likewise. Let him also keep Countess Oda, if thou canst not prevent him, and spend the rest of thy life in prayer and penitence, and may Heaven grant thee a blessed end.”

“I thank thee for thy lofty counsel, which could not be otherwise, coming from so holy a prelate,” said Jutta, in suppressed anger, while she drew her mantle about her.

“It is always at thy service, my lady,” replied the bishop, with cutting courtesy. “Whenever thou sendest for me, I am at thy service.”

“I will not forget it, most reverend sir,” said she, as she left the room, and her words sounded like a menace.

The bishop had raised the curtain, and opened the door with his own hand, and as he closed it behind her, he said to himself, —

“Sunshine and storm quickly following each other, as of old! But no tree falleth at the first stroke. She will send for me in time of need, and the day will come yet! ‘Demand where thou canst compel payment,’ said she. Ah! thou wilt pay me yet!” and he laughed quietly. “What harm if she should warn Count Albrecht! He knoweth how I love him, and it suiteth me well the Quedlinburgers should quarrel with him now. I hope that Jutta knoweth nothing of my understanding with them — but Countess Oda! We must get her into a convent. No Regenstein must marry her. I shall be forced to paint hell a little redder for our friend Hoyer.”

When the abbess was again in the saddle, she said to the chancellor, —

“Set not thy hopes upon Lauenburg, Master Willekin! The bishop will not help thee; he hath advised me to let Count Albrecht hold it in fee.”

“Is that the bishop’s advice, my lady?” asked the chancellor, astonished.

She made no answer, but made her horse trot on in advance, so as to pursue her own thoughts undisturbed. She had now taken a step which could not be retraced. Oh! that she had not; that she had followed the warning impulse which urged her to return as she entered the gate of Halberstadt! What had she obtained by this visit? Absolutely nothing. She had betrayed to the bishop her passion for Count Albrecht and her jealousy of Oda; and he would use the knowledge to further his own ends. On the other hand, she had made the discovery that she still held his heart in thrall, and this furnished her with a weapon, in case of need. He had not shocked her by

pleading for her love in return, for though she had given him no right to look for it, yet their former intimacy might be considered to deprive it of any ground of offence. She would not now confess to herself how near she had been to betraying Count Albrecht to the bishop, and accepting the aid of his bitterest foe against him. She persuaded herself that she had only carried out her promise to the councillors, without having any other object in view. But when she contrasted the deceitful nature of the bishop, full of artifice and capable of any crime, with the outspoken count, who was at least always frank and magnanimous, she could not but feel humiliated at the thought of having appealed to the former as against the latter. Her indignation at Count Albrecht, whom the bishop had so slandered, had once more disappeared, and in her complete change of temper she felt that she owed him satisfaction. She now thought herself justified in giving him Lauenburg in fief, especially as she had originally destined it for him. As expiation for her disloyalty, she would pardon his violence, and thus heap coals of fire on his head.

To her eyes, peace seemed to rest upon the landscape everywhere, and the fields of corn waved in the soft breeze. On the right, the dark blue mountain range stretched along the horizon, while nearer wooded hills rose up behind one another from the fertile plain. Before them lay Quedlinburg, with its walls and towers, and the abbess returned with a somewhat lightened heart.

As the bishop had declined to meddle in the quarrel between Count Albrecht and the city, she hoped herself to make peace between them, and now deliberated by what means she should appease the council and townsfolk.

Suddenly she reined in her palfrey, and turning to the

chancellor, who followed her at a little distance, asked, "Who are those riders yonder?"

"Count Siegfried von Regenstein and Bock von Schlanstedt, with three horsemen," answered Master Willekin.

"Count Siegfried! Thou must be mistaken, Master Chancellor. What should bring him here?"

"I cannot be mistaken, my lady," he answered.

And as their men rode up and joined them, they all agreed that it was surely Count Siegfried and Knight Bock, with three of the "Wicked Seven."

Jutta was herself convinced they were right, as they approached nearer, while the youngest of the Regensteins spurred his horse into a gallop and rode straight toward them. This meeting was not agreeable to her, but she could not well avoid it here in the open valley. She therefore remained where she was, waiting for Siegfried to overtake her. He saluted her courteously, as soon as he was near enough, and cried out, joyfully, "The relieved castellan offers fervent thanks for his release!"

"I understand thee not, Sir Count," replied Jutta, surprised.

"Oh! I know about it," laughed the youth; "it is owing solely to thy wish that Albrecht hath sent another castellan to Lauenburg, and summoned me back to Regenstein."

"Who told thee so?"

"My brother himself, my lady. He sent me the message by Bock, and thou couldst not have given me a greater pleasure."

"And thou thinkest that it was my wish alone that determined Count Albrecht to recall thee?" she asked, still incredulous.

Siegfried brought his horse a little closer to the abbess, and said, softly, "It is true, Albrecht hath another reason.

How shall I say it to thee? Thou knowest, my lady, that Countess Oda is at Regenstern, and Albrecht wisheth that I — that I should be her constant companion; he hath himself charged me to be her true knight, and bidden me seek for her favor, and, my lady, I am only too glad to obey him," he concluded, shortly.

Jutta could scarcely trust her ears; but her heart beat violently, and her agitation would only allow her to ask, "Hath Count Albrecht said all this to thee himself?"

"Yea, indeed," answered Siegfried, "through honest Bock, who hath made his own addition. And it is almost too much to believe," he added, in the fulness of his heart.

"Hasten home, then," laughed the abbess, overjoyed herself at what she had heard. "And, Count Siegfried, give my love and greeting to thy brother!"

She hardly knew what she said, and without waiting for the young count's farewell, she struck her horse and galloped off at a headlong pace.

The chancellor shook his gray head, understanding nothing of what had passed between her and Siegfried, and followed her also at a gallop. And the armed men clattered after them on their heavy beasts, throwing up the dust behind them.

On arriving at the court-yard, the abbess sprang from her steaming palfrey without assistance, flew up the steps and through the corridors to her own room, locking the door hastily behind her.

CHAPTER XIX.

WITH a resounding blast of his horn, the warder announced Siegfried's arrival at Regenstein, and the latter waved him a friendly salutation.

"God be thanked! There he is, and now all will be well," said Count Albrecht to himself, as he heard the horn.

But Oda started at the unwelcome sound which heralded the return of the castle's darling, whom, alas! all welcomed back but herself.

Nevertheless, when she descended into the court-yard with Albrecht to receive him, and she saw his handsome face lighted with love and happiness, she returned his look and greeting with a warmth which almost turned his head.

It was she who first found words.

"I expected thee to return with the famous flower of Lauenburg in thy hand," she said, smiling. "Hast thou not found it?"

"I have not searched for the flower of Lauenburg," he answered, gazing at her. "I thought only of the lily at Regenstein."

She cast down her eyes, but raised them again to Albrecht's face, when he said, "I have cared for her as well as I could, but yet hath she drooped a little."

Siegfried regarded this as a clear proof of her love for him, and said, cheerily, "Thou must do so no more, dear Countess. We will ride out hawking, hunting, and fishing, and we will amuse ourselves with pleasant pastimes for which our good Albrecht, who taketh care of us all, hath no time."

His brother nodded affectionately at him.

"And thou art right glad to be at home again, Siegfried?" said he.

"Thou seest how glad I am," laughed the young count. "I can be castellan here when thou art away fighting or making peace with bishop or lady abbess. Before I forget it, — she sendeth thee a friendly greeting, Albrecht."

"Who? The abbess? To me?"

"Yea! I met her near Quedlinburg, with the chancellor and six horse-men, coming from Halberstadt."

"From Halberstadt! What was she doing in Halberstadt?"

"I know not. She would hardly believe me when I told her that thou hadst recalled me because she wished it, and I thanked her for it."

"That is right," said Albrecht, and he glanced at Oda, who stood beside them, quietly listening.

"So Eilika was right," she thought to herself, "when she asserted that Albrecht does everything the abbess wishes."

The count mused over Jutta's ride to Halberstadt, but could think of no explanation of it. Her friendly greeting for him was much easier to understand.

"Did Ursula know, brother, that I was to return to-day?" asked Siegfried.

As Albrecht, lost in thought, did not answer, Oda replied instead, "Every one is prepared for thee, Count Siegfried; but lay aside thine armor; Ursula hath in readiness such a meal for thee as would make amends for starvation at Lauenburg."

"It was not far from that," he laughed; "when we needed a roast, we must go out into the forest and shoot something."

"I must speak a word with Ursula," said Oda, hasten-

ing away, while Siegfried looked after her with eager eyes.

Albrecht followed his brother to his room, to question him about affairs at Lauenburg, while he changed his clothing. The count glanced around hastily, and observed that no fresh nosegay, such as greeted him on his return home, stood upon Siegfried's table.

They soon descended to the hall, and seated themselves cheerfully at the well-spread board.

Blissful days now came for Siegfried. He devoted himself to Oda, early and late, and endeavored to make her happy in all ways, finding her ever kind and cheerful. He liked best to walk with Oda through the forest. There they would wander beneath the shade of the old oaks and beeches, often finding themselves, without intending it, at the Michaelstein monastery. The first time they came, Siegfried took his companion into the cloisters, ornamented with beautifully sculptured foliage, and showed her the memorial stones of his ancestors, the counts and countesses of Regenstein, who had died during the last two centuries.

The worthy abbot, with long white beard, would invite them into the refectory to partake of a refreshing draught of milk, while his eyes rested benignantlly upon the youthful pair, whom he secretly hoped and believed to be destined for one another. They liked to sit beside the murmuring brook or the monastery pond, overhung by alders and tall rushes, and Oda was never tired of gazing at the snow-white water lilies floating on the surface amid their great round leaves.

On the way home, their hearts full of the happiness of youth, Siegfried would oftentimes think that the right moment had come for him to speak. But the young knight, so fearless before an enemy, had not the courage

to confess his love to this maiden. More than once he had begun, "Countess Oda!" but she, alarmed at his solemn tone, would look at him with such deprecating eyes that he would become confused and give his sentence a different ending from that which he had at first intended, while Oda breathed a sigh of relief.

One day, however, when she seemed especially friendly, he ventured for once to ask his shy question. They were on the eastern declivity of Regenstein, where young oak-trees grew scattered among the rocks. Their tender shoots were of a beautiful ruddy hue, and as Oda sat with Siegfried in the shadow of a spreading branch, she wove them into a wreath, and with a jesting allusion to the Ballenstedt tournament, placed it upon his blond head. He looked handsome enough in this sylvan guise, and as he lay stretched upon the ground, supporting himself with one arm, a sunbeam glanced through the foliage, and touching his hair in the midst of the red wreath, changed it to gold. Oda surveyed him furtively as she arranged some wild flowers she had gathered, while he seemed absorbed in thought, idly plucking handfuls of grass now and then. After a long silence, he exclaimed, "Is it not beautiful here, Oda? Couldst thou not be content to stay here always?"

"Ah! forever!" she answered, enthusiastically, without stopping to think.

Siegfried started up. "Truly? Forever, Oda?"

"Yea, as long as I live," she cried, not reflecting how he might interpret her words or the significance of his question.

Siegfried seized her hand and stammered, with a look of impassioned love, "And with me, Oda?"

She looked up in consternation, understanding him now only too well.

“For Heaven’s sake, Siegfried, what have I said?” she cried in distress. “Do not ask me! Thou dost not wish to pain me! Thou knowest not — I cannot answer thee — indeed I cannot.”

But Siegfried’s hopes spread their wings, and carried him up to the seventh heaven. Never before had he heard her utter such words as these. Her present distress he regarded as maidenly embarrassment, the result of a natural struggle with her own heart, and he resolved not to importune her for the moment, but wait patiently till she was better prepared to hear him, and to acknowledge that she loved him in return.

As he spent so much of his time now with his charming companion, Count Albrecht was obliged to remind him not to neglect his accustomed knightly exercises, and Siegfried listened not unwillingly to his warning, glad to display his skill in riding and tilting.

In front of the upper castle was a large open space, where masters and men were used to practise.

Here Siegfried and Bock one day had a tilting match. They were armed with light breastplates, triangular shields, and leathern helmets, covered with iron or brass. The points of their spears were blunted with large oakum-wound buttons, so that they could unseat one another without inflicting serious wounds. The spectators were Albrecht, Oda, and Eilika, besides several of the castle retainers. Bock was Siegfried’s superior in jousting, but, too polite to allow the lookers-on to observe it, he spared his young master when he could. Both endeavored to shine in the eyes of the ladies, who followed the rapid movements of the horses, the well-aimed thrusts and clever parrying, with great interest, and greeted with applause every advantage gained by one or the other.

Now and then Albrecht called out a word of encourage-

ment or suggestion to Siegfried. Meanwhile, he ordered a servant to saddle his own horse, and bring him his tilting spear and other equipments. When they were brought he armed himself, and challenged Siegfried, who consented rather unwillingly, as he well knew he could not stand his ground against Albrecht.

Suspense, in part pleasurable, partly painful, took possession of Oda as the brothers met; with glowing cheeks she watched every movement, and started at every encounter of lances. In her heart she hoped the elder would be victorious, but yet she would spare Siegfried discomfiture. At first Albrecht appeared to act the part of instructor, and parried Siegfried's blows with playful dexterity, while he kept his seat immovably, and the younger broke more than one lance. But as the latter became insensibly irritated at his brother's evident forbearance, and his attacks grew more fiery and impetuous, Albrecht grasped his weapon firmly, rode sharply at Siegfried, and with a powerful thrust, threw him from the saddle.

Oda gave a little cry of distress, and would have even gone to his assistance if Eilika had not held her back, while Siegfried quickly rose to his feet.

Albrecht noticed Oda's reproachful glance, as well as her exclamation, and he regretted that he had unseated Siegfried so summarily.

"How dost thou, Siegfried?" he called out.

"Whole and sound," replied the other, without a touch of ill-feeling; "but I can ride no more to-day."

The sudden fall must have wrenched him somewhat, for he limped a little, which Oda observed with sympathy.

Count Albrecht now hailed Bock, perhaps to dispel his own dissatisfaction at having unseated Siegfried, or that Siegfried might not remain the only vanquished one.

"Come, Bock, it is long since we have tilted together; prepare to defend thyself, therefore!"

"That will I do, Sir Count," answered the knight, groaning as he fastened his helmet, for he feared that his fate was sealed.

They rode to the opposite ends of the lists, and now began an exciting joust for the by-standers, for they were both adroit tilters. It was a great gratification to his followers, who continually swelled the group of spectators, to see their lord encounter the boastful knight. All hoped their master would come off victor, and that the doughty Bock would get a lesson which would humble him.

At almost every onset, the lance-heads clashed fairly against the shields of the jousters, who were shaken, but yet kept their seats, but presently the count succeeded, by a particularly well-aimed and stalwart blow, in bringing Bock to the ground. Triumphant cheers greeted the victor. Oda waved her scarf to him, and her heart was elated. Eilika was glad that it had cost the count some pains to unseat her devoted Bock, and yet more so to see him get up unharmed.

"Console thyself, Bock!" cried the count, wiping his brow; "nought doth more honor to the teacher than to have his pupil outstrip him!"

"Yea, verily!" replied Bock. "I know that thrust well!" and he stretched his long limbs and congratulated himself that he had come off so easily.

Oda was always most friendly to Siegfried in Albrecht's presence, but to-day she was more cordial than usual, so that neither of the brothers could fail to notice it. Both divined her motive, which was to console the younger for his defeat, but they attributed it rather to love than pity.

Siegfried was happy, but Albrecht's heart was heavy, and he began to fear he had given himself credit for more

power of self-denial than he possessed. He had deceived himself, when he hoped to be able to suppress his own feeling for Oda in his brother's presence. Seeing the persistence with which Siegfried sought her affection, and the pleasure, as he supposed, with which she received these proofs of his love, he could not forbear saying to himself, "Oh, if thou wert in Siegfried's place!" Then a bad spirit would whisper, "Woo her thyself! Contend with him for her love; and as thou hast thrown him out of the saddle, so canst thou oust him from her heart; he hath no more right there than thou!"

What he missed most were the happy hours which he had passed with her alone in familiar intercourse. They were now irretrievably lost, for where Oda was, there was Siegfried; he could not banish him from her side, and there were moments when he almost regretted his return.

What he had hoped and expected from it had not come to pass. On the contrary, his own love for Oda had but increased at sight of Siegfried's devotion. Formerly he had reproached himself that he had not sent for his brother earlier; now he was vexed at Reginhild for having given him irrefutable reasons for it. He forgot that he had agreed so readily to her proposal in order to place Siegfried as a barrier between himself and Oda; and he could tell no longer whether he had taken the step rather to please his sister-in-law or to gratify Jutta's jealousy. At all events, Siegfried was now with Oda at Regenstein, and it was for this reason that Jutta had sent through him so friendly a greeting, and was so well satisfied. Had she mysteriously divined the resolution Albrecht had taken, in the solitary valley of the Goldbach, which now suddenly came back to him? Were he only once convinced of Oda's love for Siegfried, — so he had declared to himself there, — he would stifle his own feelings, and

throw himself into Jutta's arms. He fell into a discontented mood. Nothing was more contrary to his nature than to waver and procrastinate. He had something better to do than to idle away his days with one who loved him not, while dark clouds threatened to burst upon his head. He longed to fight against his foes, so as to escape from the contest within; he was vexed at the Blankenburgs' delay, and he would have rejoiced at a new quarrel with the bishop, or to be able to stop the mouths of the Quedlinburgers in their everlasting cry for independence; anything to enable him to forget his foolish love.

But before he met his enemies abroad, affairs must be settled at home. He must come to some decision. Siegfried should ask Oda's hand in marriage. It was not possible that she would refuse him; but if she did, the bishop should not on that account be allowed to get possession of Falkenstein, but he would let Oda go to the castle of Quedlinburg, and ask Jutta to be mistress of Regenstein. Perhaps some day Oda might become abbess, and he would then be the protector of her whom he had once regarded so differently. He shook his head at the idea, but went to work without delay.

"Siegfried," he said to his brother, as the latter entered the room, in response to Albrecht's summons, "how do matters stand between thee and Oda? I know, that thou lovest the countess, but I would know if she loveth thee, and will be thy wife?"

Siegfried was somewhat confused, being unprepared for this abrupt question, and answered, "I know not, Albrecht."

"Thou dost not know? Listen, Siegfried. I am tired of this delay; we must come to a decision. Go to thy lily, offer her thy heart and hand, and ask her plainly if she will

be thy wife. If she consenteth, as I hope and believe she will, we will celebrate the nuptials, and we Regensteins will go with all our fighting men to Selkethal, and take the earldom from thy noble brother-in-law, before he and his friend, the bishop, are apprised of our purpose. Then Count Hoyer and his pious Margaret may seek refuge in Halberstadt, and thou canst find a nest for thyself and thy young wife at Falkenstein. What thinkest thou?"

Siegfried had listened to his words with increased pleasure and emotion. Albrecht's allusion to Oda as his young wife, and the alluring prospect of living with her in the castle of Falkenstein, set his heart on fire. He failed, therefore, to observe Albrecht's strange manner, as he forced himself to speak in a firm and cheerful tone, whilst he felt sad enough at heart.

The youth, however, made no answer, but kept his eyes fixed on the floor in embarrassment.

"How? Thou hesitatest?" cried Albrecht, amazed.

"I would only too gladly, but I cannot," Siegfried answered, in a low tone.

Albrecht frowned. "Count Siegfried von Regenstein cannot ask a maiden's hand in marriage?"

"Hear me, Albrecht! More than once I have sought to confess my love to her, but in vain; I could never finish the sentence, for as soon as I began, she would give me such a frightened, supplicating look, that it cut me to the heart, and I could say no more. I believe that she loveth me, and not long ago, she told me that she would gladly remain here all her life; but she is too shy and timid to hear my confession, much less to answer it. Albrecht, ask her for me! Thou dost not feel as I do; thou canst say anything to her that thou wouldst."

"Siegfried!" cried Albrecht, alarmed, "thou knowest not what thou askest!"

"It is only what I would joyfully do for thee, wert thou in my place and I in thine," answered Siegfried, affectionately.

Albrecht gave his brother a look which the latter could not understand. Then extending his hand, he said, earnestly, "I will do as thou wishest, Siegfried. God grant that the result may be for our best happiness!"

"So be it, brother! Early to-morrow I ride to Gersdorf, to see Günther; thou wilt be alone with Oda, and canst easily speak with her. If she accept me, let the red pennon wave from the tower, so that I can see my happiness beckoning to me from afar."

Albrecht nodded in assent. "But if she —"

"If she refuseth, make no sign; but I will not yet despair."

So ended the interview. Siegfried departed with a light heart, but Albrecht's was heavy. He looked after his brother with a sorrowful smile, and repeated to himself his words, "Thou dost not feel as I do; thou canst say anything to her that thou wilt." As he sat at the table, he rested his head upon his hands and whispered to himself, "I must win her for him! Father in Heaven, lead me not into temptation! The issue resteth with me; as I speak to her, so must be the result for him and for me."

Then he sprang up and banished all evil thoughts.

"Nay, Siegfried!" he cried aloud, "I will not betray thee!"

Early the next morning, Siegfried was already far on his way. Albrecht ascended with Oda to their favorite stone seat on the summit of the rock, but each step seemed steeper and more difficult than it had ever been before. Oda, on the contrary, was unusually sprightly, rejoicing to be again with Albrecht, and ascended so nimbly that she reached the top first, and stood there with her happy

face turned toward the breeze, which lightly stirred her dark hair, and gazed about her with delight.

Albrecht stood still, letting his eyes rest upon the charming picture. He was alone with her whose love would make him so happy, and he dared not clasp her in his arms, as he was impelled to do, but must entreat her to be to his brother all that he longed she might be to him.

His heart ached, and his feet seemed held down by leaden weights. At this moment, Oda turned and called to him, merrily, "Well, Count Albrecht! Canst thou not climb? Here, take my hand!"

Laughingly she stretched out her hand to him, and he allowed her to appear to assist him, but it struck him as singular that she should offer him her hand at that moment.

"What wert thou listening to, or looking at?" she asked, with unconstrained friendliness, as he stood by her side, still holding her hand in his.

"I was looking at thee," he replied, deeply moved. "Thou stoodst before me like a beautiful vision, promising blessing to the beholder."

"What blessing have I to give?" she asked, gently drawing away her hand.

"The greatest of all blessings — for which I am ready even now to ask of thee."

She stepped back involuntarily, trembling.

"Do not be frightened," he said, smiling faintly; "I ask it not for myself. Thou must imagine my brother Siegfried standeth here in my place. Come, seat thyself, and let me talk to thee."

She sank upon the seat beside him, while he continued, striving to control himself.

"I need not tell thee that my brother Siegfried loveth thee with his whole heart. In his name, I entreat thy

hand in marriage, Countess Oda. Art thou willing to become his wife?"

Oda leaned back, her eyes closed, and her arms hanging, as if powerless, by her side. Presently, she looked up sadly, and said, in a low tone, —

"Dost thou wish it, Count Albrecht?"

"If thou lovest my brother, and canst be happy with him, it is my most fervent wish," he answered; and it seemed to him as if he were speaking in a dream.

She gazed fixedly before her, and shook her head.

"I cannot answer thy question, Count Albrecht," she continued, finally, as though her voice were choked; "neither yea nor nay. I am heartily attached to Count Siegfried, — but —"

"Thou hast said to him that thou wouldst willingly dwell all the rest of thy life at Regenstein; didst thou not mean in his company?" he asked, perceiving her agitation.

"Nay! nay! I had no such thought. I meant the peaceful days here, the rambles through the forest," she replied, in confusion, blushing painfully.

"But what shall I say to Siegfried? That thou refuseth him?" he urged, with beating heart.

"Nay, Count Albrecht, for I see — it is thy wish," she answered, meekly; "and if I can —"

"Stay, Oda!" he interrupted; "not for the world, on my account! Thou must choose for thyself. Thou only must decide."

She shook her head again.

"I have no wish. Let me have time to think, to make up my mind; at any rate, I hope thou wilt not be dissatisfied with me," and she rose to go.

"And Siegfried?" asked he, once more.

"Thank him, and tell him not to give up hope," she answered, faintly, as if she could say no more.

Albrecht seated himself again, and listened to her retreating footsteps.

"She loveth him," he thought, moodily; "and there is no hope for me."

Painful thoughts disturbed his mind as he sat there a long time, alone, upon the rocky platform. Finally he descended, and, going to his room, wrote upon a strip of parchment, "No red pennon, but hope notwithstanding!" He despatched a horseman with this message to meet his brother Siegfried, on the way home from the castle of Gersdorf.

CHAPTER XX.

HITHERTO, Oda had allowed herself to hope that Albrecht loved her, but now that he had sought her hand in marriage for his brother, this hope was completely extinguished. She was ready to comply with his slightest wish, but could she go so far as to marry Siegfried, to please him? She felt an affection for her youthful lover, both for himself and because he was so like his eldest brother. Should she console herself with the image, since she could not possess the original? So she questioned herself as she sat alone in her chamber, after she had left Albrecht, and had recovered from the first keen pang inflicted by his words. The handsome and attractive Siegfried loved her, as she knew, with all his chivalrous heart, and with a modesty and patience quite at variance with his natural impetuosity, which went far to prove the strength of his affection. To spare her feelings, so she said to herself, he had not even asked her himself in marriage, but had sued for the hand of the disinherited maiden through his brother. Moreover, should Albrecht ask anything of her in vain? Nay, not if he were to ask her heart's blood! But she could not deceive the husband, with whom she must journey through life. If she consented to wed Siegfried, to gratify Albrecht, she would say to him frankly, —

“I will be thy faithful wife, if thou wilt be satisfied with my dutiful devotion; more, I cannot give thee.”

But first she would try the effect of time and an earnest effort to return his love. She would begin by opening her heart to him a little, till, perhaps, by and by, she

could give it to him wholly. How long it would be before she could do so, she could not tell, but she would make a beginning.

After his conversation with Oda, Albrecht was more convinced than ever of her love for his brother, and could not understand why she did not accept his proposal immediately. He had little comprehension of the intricacies of the feminine heart, and confidently expected that she would speedily give her consent. His own fate was, therefore, decided, and he must endeavor to forget his disappointment, or compensate himself with Jutta's tempestuous love. All this he had pondered as he sat alone on the rocky height, and it still absorbed his thoughts as he wandered up and down in the orchard with Oda.

Suddenly, they heard from the gate-tower a long and peculiar blast of the horn. Albrecht and Oda looked at one another.

"A guest of princely rank!" said the count. "Who can it be?"

They went to a part of the orchard where they could overlook the gate, and discovered two ladies on horse-back, with three mounted attendants. Albrecht gave a low exclamation of surprise, and Oda immediately guessed who they were.

"The abbess, Count Albrecht?" she asked.

"Yea; Countess Jutta von Kranichfeld and Countess Adelheid von Hallermund."

Oda felt a chill creep over her.

"She hath come for me," she said.

But the count did not hear her. It seemed to him like a stroke of fate that Jutta should be here now for the first time to visit him. He hastened to greet her, and to lift her from her horse; a service which she accepted with a smile and a blush.

Oda, who remained a little in the background, saw him hold the beautiful abbess in his arms, and set her gently upon the ground, and a sharp pain penetrated her heart. The charming canoness was, in the mean time, assisted from her saddle by the jovial scrivener, Florencius, one of the ladies' three attendants.

As Oda hesitatingly approached, the abbess scanned her rapidly, and turning to Albrecht, said, softly, —

"Is that thy lily? I had not thought her so beautiful!" Then she advanced and offered Oda her hand.

The greeting was constrained, but Jutta's cleverness and self-possession soon smoothed over the awkwardness of this first meeting. She quickly assumed an easy, confidential tone, to which Oda responded as cordially as she could.

At Count Albrecht's invitation they repaired to the hall, where the abbess, after looking round as if in search of some one, asked, quickly, "Where is Count Siegfried?"

Albrecht well understood her thought, and answered, with some embarrassment, "He rode to Gersdorf early this morning, but I expect him back shortly."

"It is a pity," observed Jutta, visibly relieved, "for I wished him to hear what I have to say to thee. Florencius, my friend, come here!" and she took from the scrivener's hands a folded parchment, which until now he had kept out of sight. "Sir Count," she went on, handing it to Albrecht, "here is a deed, signed and sealed by me, giving thee the fortress of Lauenburg in fief, as a reward for thy efforts to save it from the covetousness of the Blankenburgs and the townsfolk. Take it, and defend it against all comers, — those, for example, who might try some time to seize it before dawn," concluded she, with a mischievous smile.

"Accept my most heartfelt thanks, gracious lady!"

exclaimed Albrecht, overjoyed at this termination of the affair. "Doth the deed prohibit any count of Regenstein from holding command in the castle?" he added, not being able to refrain from this little jest, in return for hers.

The abbess reddened, but Countess Adelheid came to her assistance. "It is not in the deed; and it was from the first only the desire of the Quedlinburgers."

Albrecht smiled, and asked, "Is that all they desire?"

"By no means," returned the abbess, "and I have much to say to thee on that score."

They sat down on the wooden settle which ran along one side of the room, the others chatting in the deep recess of the window, and the abbess continued, "Before all, they long to free themselves from their dependence upon thee. More than once have emissaries of the council come to me, with offers and proposals. They promise to be submissive to me, if not to thee, and to pay me double the amount yearly in tolls and customs that thou receivest, if I will but help them gain their freedom; and when I have refused their requests, they have ventured to threaten, and gave me to understand that they had powerful allies, and would not hesitate to take forcibly what they could not obtain peacefully."

Count Albrecht was filled with anger at Jutta's communications. He asked, "What answer didst thou give them?"

"I expressed my displeasure," replied Jutta, proudly; "reminded them of their sworn oaths, and advised them to go to thee with their demands."

"By all the saints! It is long since I let them feel my hand, and it is high time that I should do so!"

"But not without an armed following," cautioned the abbess. "Thou must not expect to find much love or loyalty in Quedlinburg."

"On the part of these pepper-pots and ale-house heroes!" Albrecht said, scornfully.

"Believe me, they have some secret design against thee, Count Albrecht. They would not hold their heads so high, had they not some one behind them to urge them on."

"He of the long crosier, wouldst thou say?" laughed the count.

"Laugh not!" cried Jutta. "I tell thee he will hesitate at nothing, nothing!"

"I can readily believe it," Albrecht answered carelessly. "Thou hast seen him recently, in Halberstadt?"

"I needed his advice upon some affairs connected with the convent," she replied, in some confusion; "and —"

"Enough, my lady," he interrupted. "And as to our dear Quedlinburgers, I well know how I stand with them."

"It was on that account I came here," said the abbess. "Florencius could have brought thee the deed, but I wished to warn thee, for I felt anxious, and I have had dreams of ill-omen."

He looked her directly in the face, and answered, smilingly, "I have had quite different dreams, and I trust they may be fulfilled, though that dependeth upon thee," he added, softly.

Jutta's eyes shone, but she waited in silence till she should hear more.

At this moment, most inopportunistly, the canoness called out, "Come quickly, Jutta, if thou wouldst see the incomparable knight, Bock von Schlanstedt!"

"Thou canst see him more conveniently, my lady," said Albrecht. "I will bid him to dinner."

But the abbess had risen and hastened to the window, less to see Bock than to hide her agitation.

Oda had heard, meanwhile, nothing of what had passed between Albrecht and Jutta, but she had seen the expression of their faces, and as the latter became more joyous, she grew proportionately uneasy.

Old Ursula took great pains to prepare a repast worthy the distinguished guests, and when they took their places at table, which was set with the rude, not to say scanty, table furniture of the master of Regenstein, the count apologized for its simplicity, and turning to Oda, added, "Thou wouldst have fared better with our good abbess, dear Oda."

"Yet thy prisoner doth not look as though thou hadst starved her," said the abbess.

"I never let my captives suffer from hunger," he replied, good-humoredly.

"Thou must show us thy dungeon, Countess Oda," said the canoness.

"And the chains with which they bound thee," added Florencius, carrying on the jest.

"The chains with which Countess Oda is bound are not of the kind that can be seen or heard," laughed Jutta.

Oda, embarrassed but not disconcerted, replied, "Thou art right, my lady; gratitude forgeth fetters which one does not easily throw off."

Jutta's lips moved with a sarcastic smile, which did not escape Oda. But the abbess made no answer, fearing some unpleasantness before Albrecht.

The seat at Oda's left was empty, Albrecht having reserved it for Siegfried, who had not yet returned. Between her and Countess Adelheid sat Bock von Schlantedt.

This worthy usually occupied the chief seat at the second table, where he endeavored by example and precept to inculcate good manners, without, however, producing

any decided result. From time to time he was invited to dine with his master, and this was always a red-letter day for him, not on account of the better food, but the compliment, upon which he prided himself excessively. He reserved for such occasions a somewhat odd-looking garment, of embroidered cinnamon-colored cloth, and lined with quilted leather, which was absurdly adapted to his long, lean figure. He never appeared in it without his sword and belt of knighthood, his special pride. His deportment at table was most punctilious, and he sat bolt-upright in his chair, with solemn dignity, using only the choicest expressions in speaking. He esteemed it a particular honor to dine with these beautiful and high-born ladies, thinking that it must elevate him in Eilika's eyes.

The blooming canoness, who was about the same age as her youthful abbess, and nowise her inferior in vivacity, was highly diverted by her self-important neighbor. Bock answered all her questions with elaborate deference, and tried to carry on an agreeable and instructive conversation with the lively countess, which entertained her highly. The abbess also, and Count Albrecht, who overwhelmed her with attentions, grew more and more mirthful, laughing heartily at Florencius's shrewd witticisms.

Oda alone, though involuntarily observing Albrecht and Jutta, took little part in the merriment. The others did not try to draw her into the conversation, supposing that Siegfried's absence might account for her silence. Count Albrecht often glanced at her, but turned his eyes away when he met their troubled glance, as if his conscience was not quite easy.

Finally Siegfried arrived, and on entering the hall directed looks of gratitude toward his brother and Oda, as if he would let them know he had received their message,

and was contented to wait and to hope. After saluting their guests, he took his place beside Oda, and seemed to have the enlivening effect upon her which the others had anticipated.

"How looketh the weather, Siegfried!" asked Albrecht, lightly.

"A storm is approaching; it cometh from Halberstadt," he answered, looking significantly at his brother.

But Albrecht was so absorbed with Jutta that he paid no heed to the double meaning of Siegfried's words.

Heavy clouds were gathering overhead, as they now for the first time perceived.

"From Halberstadt?" said the count. "Naturally, everything hurtful to us originateth there; even the thunder-storms."

"But if this one should descend upon us, and last till nightfall, canst thou harbor us all, Count Albrecht?"

"We have surely room enough," he replied; "but ye must not expect to rest as comfortably here as in your own princely castle."

"What will our superior think, if we do not return?" observed Adelheid.

"That we have been imprisoned here!" laughed Florencius.

"Oh, the lot of a captive at Regenstein is not a bitter one; is it, Countess Oda?" said Jutta.

"That dependeth upon the kind of fetters with which one is bound," replied the young countess.

They all laughed at her ready retort, including the abbess, but she bore her a grudge in consequence.

At this moment their eyes were blinded by a sudden flash of lightning, whereat Adelheid cried out in terror, and the laughter ceased.

But the abbess's face had an exultant expression, as

with head thrown back, she cried, "What is the matter, Adelheid? Art thou afraid of lightning? It was so hot, so oppressive, and now cometh this blessed relief. The lightning flash is like a fiery kiss, making one tremble, but with delight!"

And now the thunder rolled and reverberated overhead.

"Listen!" cried she; "how it seemeth to shake the rocks, as though it struck them with a mighty hammer. It maketh the heart flutter to witness this wild, wonderful power!"

Her companions looked at her, surprised at her excitement.

"My lady!" exclaimed Count Albrecht, "I never before saw a woman who took delight in a thunder-storm."

"I exult in storms," she answered; "I only wish *I* could thunder!"

"Thou canst, thou canst, my lady!" laughed the count. "I have heard thee."

Whereat Adelheid and Florencius nodded to one another, and smiled.

Again the lightning flashed, and the thunder pealed more loudly than before.

"The heavens crash and the earth quaketh," cried Jutta, "but thy Regenstein standeth fast, Count Albrecht; it is as unshaken by storms as thou. Thou art like Prometheus, chained up here forever to thy lonely rocks! And how hast thou incurred the anger of the gods? They thunder at thee, and threaten thee, for what? A broken word, a blighted happiness? Speak, Sir Count!"

"I never broke my word; I fear them not," Albrecht replied; "and Regenstein is in no danger; many storms have raged a'ound it, but it hath never been touched yet."

But the fiercer the storm became, the more the abbess

was moved. This outbreak of Nature exercised a wonderful influence upon her, which she could neither withstand nor explain; it seemed almost as if there were some secret sympathy between her and the storm-laden clouds. While Adelheid and Oda covered their eyes to shut out the vivid flashes, and trembled at the heavy thunder-claps, and even the men became quiet, and only exchanged short remarks, Jutta was full of restlessness and a strange delight in the warring of the elements.

To Oda, the abbess's excitement seemed most unnatural, and she said, in her dismay, —

“My lady, brave not the heavens thus!”

“Why should I not, child?” Jutta answered. “Come with me to the summit of the rocks, thou pale lily, and see the lightning play over the valley and hear the thunder-clouds roar around us like flying dragons!” and she sprang up, as if she would suit the action to the word.

The others rose also. Adelheid hung upon her arm, and cried, —

“Jutta, what wouldst thou? Thou wilt be struck by lightning!”

“Let me alone!” she whispered, hoarsely; “the storm is within me!”

She stood erect, and looked at Albrecht as if she expected he would speak. But he remained silent, watching Oda, who was half indignant, half terrified. Siegfried placed himself protectingly near her, while Florencius approached the canoness, and said, in a low tone, —

“Pray, let her alone! It will pass off with the storm.”

Bock stood like a statue, with his eye fixed on his master, and quietly waited to see what would follow. But Jutta's freakish impetuosity had put an end to the pleasure of the company, and now the rain began to fall in torrents.

"Ah!" said she, drawing a deep breath, "here cometh the rain! Let us open the windows, and let in the air! I am suffocating for it!"

She threw open a window, and leaned out to cool herself. The rain made a plashing sound upon the stones, which soothed her ear. It flowed from the rocks in little runnels, and freshened the foliage of the trees and bushes, while sweet odors ascended from the wild flowers below.

Jutta beckoned Albrecht to her side within the window recess.

"Come, Count Albrecht!" said she; "come here, and feel how sweet the air is! It is ravishing!"

He came and stood beside her, leaning over her shoulder in the narrow recess. Her head was close to his, her hair touched his brow, and her breath fanned his cheek. How could he fail to be moved by the proximity of this beautiful woman!

Presently, the clouds rolled away, the rain ceased, and here and there patches of blue sky became visible.

"Now, let us go out," said Siegfried; "it must be glorious outside!"

Albrecht and Jutta left their place at the window. She had now resumed her usual calmness; a smile played about her lips, and her eyes glowed. A gentle languor succeeded the overwrought condition which the storm had engendered, and it seemed as if she would make the others as happy as she was herself.

Florencius went with Bock to visit the stables, the dog-kennels, and bird-house, for he was fond of animals.

The others mounted the rocks, and enjoyed to the full the refreshing coolness of the air. The abbess was pleased with the view of her castle; she thoughtfully scanned the landscape, and then looked down with interest upon the huge mass of Regenstein.

While engaged in studying its details, Countess Adelheid stepped up to her and whispered in her ear, —

“Art thou surveying thy future home?”

Jutta shook her head, and answered Adelheid, —

“He hath said nought to me.”

“But thy heart speaketh.”

Jutta only smiled.

Albrecht now called their attention to the different points of the view, but seemed quiet and constrained. As his glance wandered it rested upon Oda, who stood apart on an eminence with Siegfried, close to the edge of the precipice. She rested her hand upon his shoulder, and he held her as she leaned over, looking down into the abyss, the rock being still wet and slippery.

The count stopped speaking immediately, and Jutta, noticing it, followed the direction of his gaze. Then her jealousy at once revived, and she exclaimed, —

“It is really touching, Count, to see the care with which thou watcheth over thy lily! Count Siegfried, methinks, is holding her fast, and she must see something interesting down there, to let him hold her so long.”

Albrecht made no answer, but the abbess could not see his annoyed expression, and continued, —

“There! she steppeth back! She must have felt thine anxiety! And how bashfully she smileth upon the young knight! Oh! it is beautiful!”

Still the count said nothing. He was wounded and put out of tune by her words and manner, and when the canoness suggested that it was time to depart, he made no long remonstrance.

“Thou wilt escort us part of the way, Count Albrecht?” said the abbess.

“It is but my bounden duty, my lady,” he answered.

The horses were ordered, and both ladies took friendly leave of Oda.

"Thou hast refused, hitherto, to honor our convent, Countess Oda," said the abbess; "but its gates will always open to thee, and thou wilt be welcome at any time."

"And if thou wilt visit us even for a sennight, thou wilt confer a great pleasure upon us all," added the canoness.

Oda thanked them, assuring them that it would give her pleasure to do so, if Count Albrecht would allow her.

"Which he will not do," laughed the count.

They thereupon mounted their horses, and the two brothers escorted their guests half-way to Westerhausen.

By her remarks to Siegfried as they rode along, the abbess let him see clearly that she considered him secretly betrothed to Oda, and the young lover was not displeased by her sallies, as they flattered his hopes. And Jutta, fancying herself now sure of him, also rallied Albrecht upon his feeling for his future sister-in-law.

They parted, therefore, most amicably. The ladies rode to Quedlinburg with Florencius and their servants, and the two counts returned to Regenstein. Count Albrecht repeated to Siegfried his conversation with Oda, and assured the latter of her love, which he was only too ready to believe.

Whereupon Siegfried, in his turn, said, "Now listen to me, Albrecht; if I had not gone to see Günther to-day, he would have come to us to-morrow to give us news. When, in answer to thy question to-day, I said a storm was coming, I referred not so much to the thunder-storm as to blacker clouds which threaten us from Halberstadt."

Albrecht listened attentively, and Siegfried continued, "Prince Bernhard von Ballenstedt, who beareth a bitter grudge against the bishop on account of the city of

Aschersleben, yesterday sent a private message to Günther, warning us to be on our guard, for the bishop is plotting against us. He went to Falkenstein a few days ago with Count Konrad, of Wernigerode, and several other nobles, and they were all closeted there with Count Hoyer. Prince Bernhard doth not know the result, but Count von Wernigerode came afterward to Ballenstedt and asked him if he were to receive back Aschersleben in fief, whether he would join the bishop of Halberstadt against us."

"This intelligence is surely worth a ride to Gersdorf!" cried Albrecht. "What answer did Bernhard make?"

"He refused, point-blank," replied Siegfried; "and said he would take from no man in fief what rightfully belonged to him by inheritance, and what he meant in good time to recover; and that he would never be friends, in peace or in war, with the bishop of Halberstadt."

"Good!" rejoined Count Albrecht; "we will ride out to-morrow in search of further information."

"First, the abbess went to the bishop, and then the bishop to Count Hoyer. Is not that a little singular?"

Count Albrecht looked startled. "Thou meanest—"

"I mean that here are two threads which may possibly be tied together."

"Siegfried!" exclaimed his brother, "dost thou suspect the lady abbess? Why didst thou not tell me sooner, that I might have questioned her?"

"I intended so to do," the other replied; "but when I saw thee conversing with her so confidentially, the suspicion banished; but now it hath returned, and I cannot rid myself of the idea that she hath had a hand in the game. And I verily believe, Albrecht, that it is on account of Oda."

"Ah, certainly!" laughed the elder; "thou thinkest that the world revolveth around Oda."

Siegfried reddened, but said nothing, for his brother's laugh had a bitter intonation.

They had now reached the castle gate, and dismounting, each went his own way, Siegfried to the castle and Albrecht to his lofty stone seat. The intelligence he had just received weighed heavily on his mind, and he wished to be alone.

When he reached the level rock, Oda quickly rose, having been apparently lost in thought. She seemed disconcerted by his appearance, and her eyes were red.

"Oda, what is the matter? Thou hast been weeping!" cried Count Albrecht, surprised in his turn.

She looked at him for a moment, then hiding her face, she said, with a sob in her voice, "Ah, let me alone! What is it to thee?"

And without further words she slipped past him, and hastened down the steps.

What had come over her? She had never spoken so to him before. What had he done? Count Albrecht was completely at a loss.

CHAPTER XXI.

ON the following morning Siegfried was first in the saddle. He rode toward Halberstadt, to discover, if possible, any preparations that might be on foot for the proposed attack. A little later Bock set out, with the same object, in the direction of Wernigerode, stopping at Heimbürg on his way to inform Count Bernhard that his brother wished to see him at Regenstein immediately. Count Albrecht intended to follow him, to make observations in the neighborhood of Quedlinburg, and ordered Nothnagel, Hasenbart, and Gutdiinkel to scour the woods and valleys, and be on the lookout for any soldiers, either in camp or on the march.

Bock had not been long gone before he returned, bringing with him Hinze Habernack, whom he had captured not far from Regenstein, under what seemed to him rather suspicious circumstances. The old man asserted that he was on his way to Count Albrecht with important communications, and Bock had come back with the vagrant, against whom he still bore a grudge, to make sure that he did not slip through his hands.

Led before Albrecht, Habernack reported the ride of the bishop to Falkenstein with Count von Wernigerode, Knight Rudolf von Dorstadt, and Hans von Kriendorf, the two latter sworn enemies of the count.

When the latter asked what business the bishop had on hand with Count Hoyer, the old fox squinted at him hesitatingly, licked his lips, and said, —

“I know all about it, Sir Count.” Then, after a mo-

ment's pause, "And if I dare mention it before the worthy knight here —"

"The devil take thee! Speak, or I will give thee the thumb-screws!" threatened Bock.

"Go on, go on; only out with it!" Count Albrecht exclaimed, impatiently.

"Count Hoyer promised the bishop, after Countess Margarethe's death, the earldom of Falkenstein," Habernack went on. "But the abbess of Quedlinburg hath told Bishop Albrecht that thou wilt marry Countess Oda, and demand the earldom as her inheritance. So they have settled amongst themselves to take her from thee."

"Man! How hast thou learned all this?" cried Albrecht.

"H'm! Sir Count, it was not so easy; but I promised thy knight, Bock, to bring thee tidings as soon as I could, and I hope thou wilt pay me well. Thou seest, the reverend bishop is in love with a girl whose mother is a good friend of mine, so I go to her. The devil knows how the daughter wheedles it out of my lord, — that is her affair, — but she doth it."

"When are they coming? Dost thou know that?" asked Count Albrecht.

"Nay, I know not," answered Habernack. "I believe they have not set a time yet. It will not be for some days, I think; but I do not know."

"Knowest thou any more of the matter?"

"Nay, I know no more," protested the old man.

"Habernack! The thumb-screws!" cried Bock again.

The hunchback cast a black look at him, and shook his head. Count Albrecht then proceeded to pay him well for his information, adding, "And now thou canst take thyself off!"

"Sir Count," said Bock, "I trust not the churl. Were

it not better to keep him here till we see if he hath told us the truth?"

"What! Thou swell-nosed, low-born knight!" screamed Habernack. "Is this the way thou keepest faith with me? Didst thou not promise to let me go in safety?"

"Didst thou promise him that, Bock?" said the count, sternly.

"I did, Sir Count; but —"

"Then hold to thy word!"

"Noble Count," said the old man, when he had recovered from his fright, "I am hungry and weary; let me rest a little, and have a morsel of food and drink. Then I will go on my way to Blankenburg; there I have many acquaintances, and I will look about me, and come back and tell thee if I see anything afoot. If I am not here by evening, thou wilt know that I have naught to tell."

"Good," answered the count, after a short pause; "do as thou sayest. Bock, take him with thee, and see that he has his food, and then set out thyself for Heimburg."

Bock led Habernack to the serving-men's quarters, not observing, while the latter hobbled slowly along, as if foot-sore, what sharp glances he cast about him. Then Bock rode off, and left the old man talking with the servants, from whom he soon extracted what he wished to know.

Toward noon Hinze Habernack reached the castle of Blankenburg, where Count Berthold had been expecting him for two days, and paid him in good gold for all that he had heard and seen at Regenstein.

"They are asleep up there, like marmots in winter. The garrison is no stronger than usual, the stock of cattle scanty, and they have had no supplies for a long time. Be quick, and ye will find them unprepared. I have taken care of that, as the reverend bishop ordered."

The old rogue did not add that he had betrayed the bishop's designs to his foe, only deceiving the latter as to the time of their execution.

"Knowest thou anything of Falkenstein's people?" asked Count Berthold.

"They are in Wegeleben, Sir Count."

"When canst thou be in Halberstadt?"

"In three hours I will be at the reverend bishop's."

"Tell him that we are ready," said the count. "In Wernigerode they only await the signal from me. I can send a horseman thither at a moment's notice, and another to Quedlinburg, and before midnight we will all come together."

The cunning messenger immediately set out again, taking the shortest road to Halberstadt.

Count Albrecht was disturbed as well as enraged at the report of the vagrant, in which he put faith, as it coincided substantially with the Prince of Ballenstedt's warning. Siegfried was right; the attack was against Oda, and the abbess was at the bottom of it all, for it was at her instigation the bishop had induced Count Hoyer to recover his sister by force. Jutta had visited the bishop before Siegfried's recall, and labored then under the delusion that not he, but Albrecht, wished to marry Countess Oda. It was, therefore, due to her insensate jealousy that he must now fight against all his enemies at once, and he felt sure that the Quedlinburgers would not be idle.

It was some time before Bernhard made his appearance, and, meanwhile, Albrecht was with Oda. She was now as composed and gentle as usual, and strove to make amends for her yesterday's behavior by redoubled friendliness. He read in her eyes a mute entreaty that he would ask her no questions, and accordingly he said nothing, presently forgetting all about it in the multiplicity of his cares and anxieties.

When Bernhard finally arrived, the brothers went up to Albrecht's room, where hot words passed between them. Bernhard reproached Albrecht with his unaccountable obstinacy, which had caused all their trouble, so that now, for the sake of this maiden, they were menaced by so many foes. Had he sent her long ago to the convent, and married Jutta, whose feeling for him he had so long known, she would have had no grounds for jealousy, and they would have been spared this present danger.

Bernhard allowed it to be seen plainly that he thought Albrecht's own feeling for Oda was the true reason why he had detained her at Regenstein.

But the more Albrecht perceived the truth of his remarks, the more angry his brother's reproaches made him. He answered, shortly, —

“The struggle for the earldom of Falkenstein could not be prevented. Siegfried loveth Oda, and wisheth to marry her, so that sooner or later we must fight for her inheritance.”

“Who can tell if that would have been necessary?” urged Bernhard. “Perchance Hoyer himself would not have been willing to disinherit his sister, had Siegfried fairly sued for her, and been content to wait patiently for the earldom; in which case, I trow, the bishop would not have dared to contest our rights.”

“Wherefore should he wait?” cried Albrecht. “What can be acquired to-day one need not wait for till to-morrow, and, mayhap, lose altogether.”

“This restless craving for power, — it is in thy very blood,” said Bernhard, “and is the one failing of thy brave and honorable heart! It will be thy undoing, some day, and will bring us all to ruin!”

“If thou wouldst rock children rather than break spears, thou canst,” laughed Albrecht; “my desires are different.”

Bernhard was silent, and at this point they wisely changed the current of their talk, and took counsel as to what should be done under their present circumstances. The following day Albrecht must announce the threatened attack to the governors and garrisons of the Regensteins, warning them to keep strict watch and ward, and also send messages to the friendly counts of the Hartz country and of Swabia, who had promised their assistance, to hold themselves in readiness. Also, Regenstein must be well supplied with provisions for a siege.

He concluded not to ride to Quedlinburg, but to remain with Bernhard until toward evening. Siegfried, Bock, and his companions returned, one by one, not having seen anything remarkable. He who did not return was Hinze Habernack, and the brothers accordingly concluded that the impending assault was not very near at hand.

Bernhard now proposed to return to his wife, whom he knew would be anxiously expecting him, and Albrecht accompanied him to the gate. As they walked slowly over the rocks in the twilight, Albrecht stopped suddenly before the dark opening in the ground, which was now half choked up, and said, —

“Listen! Dost hear?”

“What?” asked Bernhard.

“The knight templar is hard at work,” answered Albrecht, in a low tone.

“Yes; I hear him,” said Bernhard. “He telleth us, what we already know, that troublous times are in store for us.”

“I deem it a bad portent that he knocketh so loudly,” returned Albrecht.

Bernhard nodded assent, and they went on in silence.

From below ground came dull sounds, that could not be explained in any natural manner. The dark, underground

passage led to the knight templar's dungeon, and from time immemorial this legend had been handed down concerning it.

A former Regenstein had kept a templar imprisoned here in a deep dungeon for years, during which he sought unceasingly, with desperate efforts, to cut his way through the rock with a piece of old iron. He was not interfered with, but he never saw the light again, and one day the knocking suddenly ceased: the knight templar was dead. But his spirit was not at rest. The hopeless work went on forever, and when any danger threatened the house of Regenstein the knocking and scraping could be distinctly heard in the stillness of the night. Before any great misfortune—sure to occur within the year—his spirit was seen, clad in a flowing white mantle, upon the summit of the rocks, and afterwards slowly descending again to the dismal prison.

Arrived at the castle gate, Bernhard threw himself into the saddle, while Albrecht returned by the way he came. He stopped again at the subterraneous opening, and listened. The sounds were still to be heard beneath his feet. "If only I knew how to release him, poor restless spirit, I would do so," he thought. "But he cannot be exorcised; for us Regensteins he is the voice of fate. And Bernhard saith that Oda is the cause of all these troubles. What folly! He must always be croaking. But Oda! A glance of her blue eyes maketh one forget every trouble!" And, full of the thought of her, the count returned to the castle.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHEN the sun rose next morning upon Regenstein, scattering the mists which rose from the woody glens and hollows, the castle began to bestir itself, and just then was seen the gleam of polished steel upon the steep ascent leading to the castle. A trumpeter appeared before the gate, and blew a prolonged blast, which the warder was not slow to answer. Beside the former was an armed man, who wore the belt of a knight, and carried in his hand a pine branch to indicate his office as herald. He asked leave to speak with the lord of the castle, or his representative. Count Albrecht and Bock were both awake, and the latter hastened to the entrance. He called from the wall above to know what the stranger wanted, and the latter replied, in a loud voice, —

“I am the Knight Bosse von Silda. My lord, the noble Count Hoyer von Falkenstein, sendeth greeting to Count Albrecht von Regenstein, and demandeth that his sister, Countess Oda, whom ye here unlawfully hold captive, shall be straightway delivered into our hands. If ye will not do this, we will besiege your castle, and attack ye with fire and sword, and not withdraw till ye open your gates, and deliver the maiden into our hands. We shall bring four hundred fighting men, and ye may expect no help from without, neither men nor provisions. Therefore we challenge you, and we await a well-considered answer.”

“I will answer thee,” cried Bock, from above. “I am the Knight Bock von Schlanstedt. Ye cannot have the maiden, and we need no assistance, for we have too many rather than too few men, and our storehouses are full, for

we knew ye were coming. As to your four hundred, if ye come too near our walls ye will get something on your heads ye will not relish. This is our answer. If ye would have it from my master himself, I will summon him; but it is not necessary."

"Nay, it is not necessary," said Count Albrecht, who now appeared upon the tower. "What is thy demand?"

"The release of Countess Oda von Falkenstein," called back the herald.

"That I refuse, without further parley," cried Albrecht. "Who is thy leader?"

"Count Berthold von Blankenburg."

"I thought so," said the count; "and who commandeth the bishop's force?"

"The Knight Rudolf von Dorstadt."

"Very well. Tell your masters to make haste, and let them see how speedily we will open our gates for them!" cried Albrecht, and descended again to give necessary orders to his men.

"Would that I had not let that accursed rogue of a Schabernack escape yesterday," muttered Bock to himself, as he strode along the breastworks to enjoin upon the garrison the need of a stubborn resistance.

Notwithstanding the bold words of the herald, the condition of affairs was a critical one. Thanks to its natural advantages, the stronghold could be defended by a comparatively small body of troops, and with suitable vigilance they might feel almost sure of being able to hold the enemy at bay. But a prolonged siege must be fraught with danger, as they were wholly unprepared for it, not having thought of laying in an unusual store of provisions.

Albrecht ordered the private signal of distress to be hung from the watch-tower to apprise Bernhard of the sudden attack. Though the garrison at Heimburg could

do nothing alone against the besiegers, Bernhard could procure help by sending out messengers. But the answering signals informed them that the enemy had forestalled them by surrounding Heimburg also. From Regenstein they could see that men were posted in a wide circle around the fortress, and that riders were in motion, apparently with the purpose of preventing any one approaching, so that news of the siege should not get abroad in the neighborhood. For the present, therefore, they could hope for no aid.

The soldiers and servants were, to a man, full of courage, because Count Albrecht was with them. His firmness and self-possession, his assured glance, and the clearness and precision of his orders, inspired them with confidence. The weakest points of the castle were strongly fortified, and the gates were especially well guarded, but as yet no serious attack had been made.

Skirmishing was kept up at intervals; arrows were shot from behind trees and crags as well as from the ramparts, and larger missiles from huge whalebone bows, which were supported upon wooden frames, being too heavy to be held otherwise. The besieged, likewise, strewed the ground, outside the walls, as far as they could be thrown, with caltrops, large balls with four sharp, projecting iron spikes, one of which always pointed upward, to the detriment of men and horses.

If Count Albrecht had only had men to care for he would have troubled himself but little, but he was tortured by the thought that, if the contest lasted long, if no succor came, and Oda suffered from privation, he must give her up. He would have preferred to conceal from her that she was the real cause of the assault. But that was impossible. She would soon discover it, even if he withheld the knowledge, and so many of his men had heard the

knight's challenge that it would be impossible to keep it secret.

And, in fact, Oda heard the truth within an hour, and not as Albrecht or Siegfried would have told it to her, but from the lips of the over-wrought Eilika.

The latter was wakened early by the unusual disturbance, and, in going out to discover the cause, she met Bock, full of his own importance, running to and fro as if possessed, and asked him the meaning of the commotion.

"Ha! It is all for your sakes," cried the knight, enthusiastically. "We are encompassed on every side, and Count Hoyer demaundeth your release. The Falkensteins, the Blankenburgs, Wernigerodes, and the bishop's followers surround us, and are going to storm the castle and fetch you out."

"Ah, merciful heaven! This is frightful, Sir Knight! Do not give us up! exclaimed the distressed maid. "They will put us into the convent."

"Have no fear, dear Mistress Eilika," answered Bock, grandiloquently; "this arm and this good sword shall defend ye both. We will not yield you up, as long as we have a morsel of food left, and after that —" But his last words were lost in the depths of the armory, into which he presently disappeared.

Eilika ran to her young mistress with the dismal tidings. Oda dressed herself in trembling haste, and went to see Count Albrecht. She met him coming from the eastern ramparts, in full armor, and seeing at the first glance that she knew all, he tried to soothe her fears, while he smilingly said, "Be calm, dear Oda! Thou art secure enough here! Regenstein cannot be taken; no foeman will enter the gate or scale the wall; they will soon retreat, but *not* with thee."

"Let me go with them, Count Albrecht," she returned,

sadly but decidedly. "I wish no fighting on my account. Let me go, that thou mayest have peace."

"By no means, Countess Oda! Thou shalt not leave Regenstein. Thou servest merely as a pretext. It is an old feud, which hath been gradually growing bitterer, and must be settled some day."

"Accept their pretext, then, and deliver me to them," she still urged. "I bring thee naught but trouble."

"Oda!" The tone in which he spoke her name came from the depths of his heart. She looked down in confusion.

"Give me thy hand," he continued. "Remain, to please me, as thou hast done hitherto. Wilt thou not?"

She could not resist; no, she would not leave him now. As once before, she gave him her hand, and thought within herself, "If I may not live with him, perchance I may at least die with him."

"I will stay, Count Albrecht," she answered with moist eyes, which at the same time shone with suppressed joy; "and if I can be of any service to thee, thou knowest I shall be glad."

"If I can see thee cheerful and contented," said he, "I am content!"

As they walked they met Siegfried, also fully armed, with eager face, delighted to have the opportunity to fight for Oda, and protect her at any risk. His talk was warlike, and did not tend to quiet her apprehensions. He said to Albrecht, almost indignantly, —

"They come no nearer; I verily believe they have no means of storming the fortress."

"Very possibly," answered Albrecht, wishing to soothe Oda's fears as much as possible.

Siegfried would hardly leave the walls, put himself in the most dangerous places, and apparently tried to pro-

voke an attack. But as they showed no signs of making an assault on the third day after their first appearance, Albrecht himself was astonished, and could not explain the unaccountable delay. The enemy had not retired; could it be that he was not strong enough to venture upon an assault? Albrecht resolved to discover the cause of his inactivity, and to sally out for this purpose.

The sortie was made early the following morning, under Albrecht's command. Only a small force could be spared, however, that the walls might not be left unprotected.

The enemy's nearest outpost was surprised and thrown into confusion, but help came quickly from all sides, and after a short contest, Albrecht was obliged to retire before superior numbers, or his retreat to the castle would have been cut off. Siegfried had gone so far in his impetuosity that he could no longer hear Albrecht's commands, and would doubtless have been captured if Bock, with his trusty comrades, had not followed him, and at the risk of their lives rescued him.

Though the Regensteins lost only three men, they could ill be spared. Rupfer, one of the "Wicked Seven," though severely wounded, was rescued with considerable difficulty and carried into the fort. Siegfried received a heavy blow on the head from a mace, which, however, did not break his helmet, as it was parried by Bock, who, with Gutdünkel and others, kept back his assailants, and carried him to the castle, partially stunned. Albrecht and his followers were all hard pressed, but they kept together, the count exposing himself fearlessly, and dealing blows right and left with his formidable battle-axe. Finally they reached the sally-port and the gates closed behind the last man, no other than the old were-wolf, Nothnagel.

Albrecht was indignant with Siegfried, and reproached him for his rashness. He had convinced himself of the enemy's strength, and that a contest in the field must be out of the question.

Bock had escaped with a swollen shoulder and a thrust in the groin, which had not, however, penetrated his armor, though he could not forbear a little modest bragging for Eilika's benefit. Siegfried was left in Oda's care, and when she gently bound his aching head with wet cloths, happy to be of use and to lessen his pain, she was more than rewarded by his happy, grateful smile. At the same time, in her inmost heart she thought, "Ah, if I could only tend Albrecht thus!" while glad enough that there was no need of it.

The next day, the besiegers replied to the sortie by storming the southeast wall, but after an obstinate struggle were beaten back, without loss to the Regensteins. Siegfried, to his great chagrin, could not join in the combat, not being able to bear the weight of his helmet.

Each side had now tested the strength of its antagonists, and desisted temporarily from active hostilities. Albrecht made up his mind that it was the enemy's intention to starve out his garrison, and his anxiety increased continually, for he knew that they could hold out but two weeks longer, though their inexhaustible wells were a great blessing.

With longing eyes, Albrecht, Siegfried, and Oda gazed from the summit of the rocks, hoping they might see succor approaching. Oda would remain there the greater part of the day, like a sentinel, shading her eyes with her hand, and scanning the horizon. She pictured to herself how she would fly down the steps to Albrecht, exclaiming, "They come, they come!" But they came not, and Oda

grew more downcast each day. It was on her account that blood had flowed, that men had been killed and wounded, that Siegfried had barely escaped death, and who could say what the end would be!

She dared not again propose to Albrecht to let her go, but he saw plainly that she suffered, and was grieved. He could hardly bear this, and ransacked his brain, striving to discover some means of freeing himself from the foe. At last a plan suggested itself, which at first seemed fantastic, but which, as he considered it in his mind, gradually ripened into a definite resolve. It would be a bold undertaking, and he must take his life in his hand, but this he had done before, and now it would be for Oda.

"Siegfried," said he to his brother, "if no one cometh to help us, I must do so myself. How is it possible? thou wouldst ask. Listen! There is only one way of escape for us, which is not guarded by the enemy, and I have concluded to take that way, — down the precipice there."

"Albrecht! Art thou in jest or earnest?" cried Siegfried.

"Sober earnest!" answered his brother. "I can be lowered in the night by a rope, walk to Ditzfurt, send thence to the fortress, go to Count Burchard von Mansfeld, who can despatch messengers to Stolberg and Hohnstein, and in three or at most four days return with a considerable force and free you all. Ye can hold out as long as that, and if I can only get to Ditzfurt unhindered, the plan cannot fail. Call Bock!"

"But why shouldst thou risk thy life thus?" objected Siegfried. "It would be much better for me to go than for thee, upon whom we all depend. Think what would become of us, if thou wert to fall or be captured!"

"I must go myself," Albrecht declared. "Thou shalt

remain with Oda ; thou wilt be her protector for life, and thou must not leave her now."

But Siegfried begged that he might go. "Thou art needed here more than I. I will gladly make the attempt. Albrecht. let me try it!" he said.

"Nay." persisted Albrecht ; "I must be the one to go, and to come back with men whom I can lead into action."

Siegfried was obliged to yield, and Albrecht added, "One thing more ! Oda must know nothing of my purpose to-day. When I am gone, thou canst tell her."

Bock was now let into the secret, and he also begged to be allowed to go in place of his master, but was refused. Then they set about making the necessary preparations with secrecy.

The chain of the well was drawn up, and lengthened with strong ropes, which they hoped would suffice, and by which Albrecht was to be lowered, under Siegfried's and Bock's superintendence, by the armorer Klinkhard and two strong men. So long as all was quiet at Regenstein, Siegfried was to let the red pennon wave from the tower, so that Albrecht, on his return, might see that he was in time. A loud trumpet-note would be the signal for an attack, which Siegfried would aid by making a sortie with the whole garrison.

All was now arranged and decided upon, and they had no difficulty in concealing their purpose from Oda. Since the siege began, Count Albrecht, Siegfried, and Bock alternately kept watch at night, constantly going the rounds to see that all was well, and the other two stayed till a late hour with him whose turn it was to watch. Therefore, Oda was not surprised that the two brothers did not go to rest, after bidding her good night. Albrecht said nothing more than usual, but when she was not looking, devoured her with his eyes, as if he were never to see her again.

When the hour came, the three mounted the rocks, Albrecht in full armor, and covered with a dark cloak. They found Klinkhard, Nothnagel, and Schadow waiting for them with the chain.

The night was clear, and the moon would rise about midnight. The abyss lay black and unfathomable before them, and absolute silence reigned. The chain was made fast to the middle of a piece of wood, astride which Albrecht sat, and a rope was wound around his body, leaving hands and feet free, so that he could keep himself from striking against the face of the rock when the chain swung. As they bound him, he silently committed himself to the care of Heaven; then, embracing Siegfried, and pressing the hands of the others, he was lowered by Klinkhard, Nothnagel, and Schadow over the brink of the precipice.

The five spectators shuddered as their beloved leader disappeared into the frightful abyss. No one spoke a word; they heard his iron-shod feet strike against the rock, and now and then loosened fragments would roll into the depth below. But these sounds soon ceased, only the chain was heard rattling lightly over the rocks as they let it out, inch by inch, and when it came to an end, and they began cautiously to lower the knotted rope, all was again silent.

A quarter of an hour passed in great anxiety lest chain and cable should not hold, or not prove long enough for the purpose. Suddenly they perceived that the weight was gone. Was the chain broken? Or had it been caught in a cleft of the rocks? Had the count fallen, or had he reached the ground? They waited a little, and then began carefully to draw up the rope. The chain was free, and when they came to the end, they found the rope, which had been bound around the count's body, wound about

the piece of wood, so they knew he had reached the ground alive, and that his heroic attempt would probably succeed.

With lightened hearts they left the spot, and Bock watched in his master's place that night.

Siegfried was up betimes next morning, proud of being Oda's protector, and commander of the beleaguered fortress. He charged Bock to tell every man how, and for what purpose, Count Albrecht had left Regenstein, so that their spirits might be cheered by the hope of speedy relief. But he had deliberated long as to how he should enlighten Oda. Knowing that she lived in constant fear by reason of the danger to which the brothers were exposed, and reproached herself with being the unhappy cause of it all, he resolved to inform her in the most cautious manner of Albrecht's hazardous journey.

During these latter troubled days, Oda was often obliged to take her breakfast alone. She had already finished her repast, when Siegfried entered the hall.

"Did Count Albrecht change places with thee or Bock last night?" she inquired, hastily.

"Why dost thou ask?"

"It was not his footstep which I heard in the courtyard during the night," she explained.

"Dost thou know Albrecht's step so well?" exclaimed Siegfried, in surprise.

She was afraid of betraying too much, and so said nothing.

"Thou art right," he continued, as Oda did not answer. "Bock took the watch last night."

"It was thy brother's turn. Is Count Albrecht not well? Where is he?"

Where is he? This simple question quite took away his presence of mind. What should he reply?

"Albrecht is — gone,"

“Gone!”

“Yea; he hath left Regenstein.”

Siegfried was now convinced that he had never before cut so sorry a figure in his life.

Oda was silent, and gazed at him with a troubled expression, as if he had spoken in some strange tongue which she did not understand. Suddenly, a change came over her face, and she cried out, —

“Hath there been fighting in the night? Hath the count ventured out alone, and been taken prisoner?”

“Nay,” answered Siegfried; “he hath stolen away, to bring us succor.”

“In the midst of the enemy! Count Siegfried, thou art hiding something from me! Tell me all! What hath happened? Where is Count Albrecht?”

At sight of Oda’s sudden vehemence, and her trembling solicitude for Albrecht, Siegfried felt a strange fear take possession of him, and his mind was filled with foreboding.

“Albrecht did not pass through the enemy’s camp, but went over the rocks,” he said, looking at Oda fixedly, with a dawning perception of the terrible truth.

“The rocks! What rocks? What rocks, Count Siegfried?”

“The precipice; but he —”

She sprang toward him, and seized him by the arm.

“The precipice! He hath fallen over! Crushed and dead! Oh, my God! my God!”

She covered her face with her hands, not knowing, in her despair, what she said or did; while all the light and life died out of Siegfried’s heart at her words.

He was silent for a moment, looking at her as she stood pale and rigid, and then replied, in a low tone, —

“Do not distress thyself, Countess Oda! Albrecht

liveth. We have lowered him down the precipice safely. In three days he will return with his friends, and enter the castle gate as victor. And then" — his voice falling almost to a whisper — "then, Countess Oda, I will tell him that thou lovest him."

"That thou shalt never do!" she cried, in great agitation. "If thou darest say so, if thou lettest him so much as suspect it, I will throw myself from the precipice! I swear it, by all that is sacred!"

With these words her strength seemed to fail her. The passionate love which she had so long suppressed, and so painfully hidden under a calm exterior, had now broken forth with overmastering force, and Siegfried's beautiful castles in the air were overthrown forever. She grieved bitterly at the thought of his ruined happiness, but not another word could she utter. With a look of the deepest compassion, which he did not see, she glided past him out of the hall.

Siegfried sank down upon a stool beside the table, buried his face in his hands, and fairly wept.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WEARISOME were the days which Siegfried and Oda now passed in longing expectation of Albrecht's return. Though they were both calm, and friendly to one another, and neither made the slightest allusion to their late distressing interview, the time seemed very long to Oda, and presented a great contrast to the happy hours she had spent alone with Albrecht in Siegfried's absence. The latter had immediately begged her permission that Bock might be allowed to sit with them at their table while his brother was away, and she gladly consented, understanding perfectly his object, desiring as much as he to avoid any further intimate relations.

Bock did the greatest part of the talking, and attributing the silence of the others to their solicitude for Albrecht, tried to encourage them as much as possible, praising his foresight and energy, which he declared to be equal to every emergency. He could not forgive his master, however, for letting Habernack slip off, for he felt sure that the old rogue had only tried to lull them into security with his false story of the time appointed for the attack, and had then informed the enemy how little prepared Regenstein was for a siege. Bock, therefore, vowed deadly revenge against the crafty hunchback.

The enemy lay quietly encamped, apparently hoping, by starvation, to bring the fortress to terms. On the third day after his departure, a man was posted on the summit of the hill to watch for the count's approach, it having been agreed that he should lie in wait till the preconcerted signal was given.

Finally, on the fifth morning the sentinel made the joyful announcement, "They come, they come!" Every one hastened to the heights and saw an approaching squad of horsemen, which seemed to be too few in number to overpower the enemy. But they knew not that this was only half of the whole force, the other half, which could not be seen from where they stood, being near at hand, on its way from the south, so that the enemy might be attacked simultaneously from opposite sides.

Siegfried ordered the garrison immediately to prepare for a sortie, and at the trumpet blast they burst out of the gates and fell upon the foe from a third quarter.

Notwithstanding a brave resistance, which prolonged the combat for hours, the besiegers were completely routed, though the investing forces of Heimburg joined in the fray, soon followed by Count Bernhard with his garrison. A considerable number of prisoners was left in the hands of the victors.

When the soldiers of the besieged fortress met their heroic leader upon the field, after the conflict was over, they cheered him wildly, flourishing their weapons in the air, unmindful of all discipline. Even Bock forgot his dignity, and raising himself in the saddle, vociferated with all his might, "Victory, victory!"

Count Albrecht's brothers greeted him with hearty delight, all of them being present except Ulrich, — Günther and Poppo having come, with their followers, at Albrecht's summons, from Gersdorf and Crottorf to fight for the stronghold of their fathers. Bernhard, who had himself been invested, could not understand Albrecht's appearance at the head of his allies, and heard with astonishment of his midnight exploit. Siegfried pressed Albrecht's hand without a word, but the latter took his silence as an expression of speechless joy at the triumph of their house over their united opponents.

The few noble prisoners — among whom was neither the count of Blankenburg, nor of Wernigerode, nor Rudolf von Dorstadt — were released, after promising, upon oath, to pay a ransom as soon as they should be able to do so.

But when it came to the mustering of the common prisoners, who were from Halberstadt, Ascher-leben, and Quedlinburg, Count Albrecht was not disposed to show them equal lenity. He had learned from a Halberstadt soldier that these three cities had been for a long time secretly in alliance with the bishop against him, and this intelligence angered Count Albrecht; but he was especially indignant with the citizens of Quedlinburg, who owed him allegiance, and of whose enmity he had had many proofs in his late rapid ride through the country.

After depriving the other prisoners of their armor and weapons, they were finally released, but he could not be induced to free the Quedlinburgers, and his friends had much ado to prevent him from putting them all to the sword.

In the enemy's camp was found a goodly store of provisions, — very welcome to the inmates of Regenstein.

Many of the followers of the friendly counts, as well as the men from Gersdorf and Crottorf, were distributed by degrees in the neighboring castles, and those who could not find room there camped at the foot of Regenstein, for there was yet work for them to do.

The victorious allies now rode together to the castle to celebrate their success. Besides the five brothers, there were the counts Burchard von Mansfeld, Bernhard's father-in-law, Heinrich von Stolberg, and Dietrich von Hohnstein, with many of their followers, with whom Bock von Schlanstedt fraternized.

Albrecht thought of Oda in the midst of the fray, and when it was over he sent to her to let her know that he

was unhurt. She anticipated his return with eager impatience, but her joy was accompanied by a feeling of shrinking apprehension, as if he must now know that she loved him. Not that she imagined for a moment that Siegfried had betrayed her secret, but it had escaped from her keeping, and she felt that it was no longer only hers.

After a tedious delay another messenger arrived, to inform old Ursula of Albrecht's speedy arrival, and the number of his guests.

The thought of meeting him first in the presence of strangers was distasteful to Oda, and that she might see him, unseen herself, she hastened to the spot amidst the shrubbery, where they had watched the arrival of the abbess and her train. Here she now stood with beating heart, listening intently.

At last came the sound of the warder's trumpet, more triumphant, she thought, than she had ever heard it. And there — there he was, at the head of his friends and followers, proud and elate. Oh, how well he looked, as he sat erect on his powerful horse, his face lighted with a smile, while his eyes glanced here and there, as if searching for some one, — could it be for her? She drew back quickly, and he passed by.

Count Albrecht led his guests to the castle, and said, in a blithesome tone, "Günther and Siegfried, see that our guests are well cared for. Poppo, do thou look after the table."

"And what wilt thou do, Albrecht?" Siegfried would have liked to ask.

Albrecht withdrew and proceeded to the orchard, where Oda still lingered, as if by a secret presentiment.

In another moment he stood before her, and he had well-nigh drawn her to his breast.

"Oda, Oda!" he cried, stretching out both hands.

She looked at him, trembling, but was unable to speak, while he forgot for the minute that his part was to woo her for Siegfried; and she, that her love for him must be hopeless.

"Thou seest I have returned to thee," he said at last.

"Welcome home, Count Albrecht," she replied. "I wish thee joy. And I thank thee for thy message."

"Wert thou angry with me for leaving thee without a word?"

"If thou hadst bidden me farewell, I would not have let thee go," she said, softly.

"I went for thee, dear Oda, and for Siegfried, whom I would not put in peril, for we could not tell —"

"And for Siegfried." His name painfully awakened her from her blissful dreams. She could not find words to thank him for his devotion, but only said, "Come within, to thy guests, Count Albrecht."

As they went into the castle, side by side, he began, "After all, I must let thee go for a little. We are all about to take the field, and thou canst not stay here alone. Will it suit thee if we escort thee to the castle of Quedlinburg? The abbess will surely receive thee cordially; she hath herself invited thee, and I hope thy sojourn there will not be long, and Siegfried hopeth so," he added, with emphasis.

"I am content with whatever thou thinkest best," she replied, submissively.

"Thou must be prepared, then, to depart day after to-morrow. We set forth then," said he.

Oda entered the hall, but now somewhat disheartened, courteously saluted Albrecht's guests, and retired as soon as possible to her apartment. Siegfried had met her coming from the orchard with Albrecht, and he saw that she was very pale.

The nobles and knights now seated themselves at table and made merry, while Albrecht failed to notice how his youngest brother's eyes continually rested upon him with a look of thoughtful melancholy.

As they talked over the different phases and turns of the conflict which had just taken place, their conversation took the form more and more of a council of war; for now that they were all together, they determined to give the bishop and the cities with whom he was in league a lesson which they should not soon forget.

Count Burchard von Mansfeld was in favor of first seizing the earldom of Falkenstein; the counts of Stolberg and Hohnstein wished to begin operations by revenging themselves upon the Blankenburgs and Wernigerodes, while Albrecht's brothers urged that the bishop should be attacked, without loss of time.

But Count Albrecht shook his head, and said, grimly, "Quedlinburg, first of all! If they will not bow beneath the yoke, I will make them pay well for their misdeeds. Do ye know that while we were shut in here they took Gunteckenburg by surprise, and reduced it to ashes?" Exclamations of indignation, threats, and imprecations interrupted him.

"Luchard was forced to fly with his men, as many of them as were still living, to the Wiperti monastery," he went on; "but the rebels pursued them thither, destroyed the outside walls which I built myself, and would have razed the whole building to the ground if the abbess had not interposed with the full weight of her authority."

"How knowest thou this?" asked Count Burchard.

"On my ride to Mansfeld, I met one of Luchard's men, who had been wounded and cut off from his fellows, and he told me all. Besides which, the Quedlinburgers have declared themselves independent of my jurisdiction. Add

to this the secret alliance with the bishop, and the measure is full to overflowing. I will destroy their Town House for them, and those who have crowed like cocks over the downfall of Gunteckenburg may find their heads too loose upon their shoulders."

No one said anything, and the count continued, "But we Regensteins are a match for the Quedlinburgers; meanwhile ye can seize Falkenstein, and then we will all fall upon the bishop of Halberstadt."

"He will defend himself, for he hath strong allies," said Count von Stolberg. "But if the Hartz region and Swabia are turned into a great battle-field, it will not be our fault."

"Peradventure, we could save ourselves somewhat," suggested Count von Mansfeld. "We might send the citizens of Halberstadt a challenge, letting them know the bishop is the cause of it. They love him not, and he hath foes in his own chapter."

"Agreed!" cried Albrecht. "Poppo, write a challenge for us; thou knowest where to find parchment and ink."

Poppo brought the writing materials, and wrote the challenge, the customary wording of which was at least as familiar to these warlike men as the Lord's Prayer.

Meanwhile the others continued their consultation over the plans. They decided that the counts of Mansfeld, Stolberg, and Hohnstein should attack Falkenstein, seize the fortress, drive out Count Hoyer, and garrison it. Count Albrecht, on his part, should bring all his forces against the city of Quedlinburg. During the siege, only the necessary guard should be maintained in the Regenstein castles, but mounted soldiers should patrol between them, and keep Count Albrecht informed of whatever might occur.

So all was finally arranged, and the next day but one was appointed for setting forth.

Poppo now read aloud his challenge: "Be it known to ye, burgomaster and council of Halberstadt, that we, counts" (here followed the names), "with our allies, on behalf of Albrecht, Count von Regen-stein, hereby declare ourselves openly your enemies, and we pledge ourselves to sack and destroy your city, if ye do not within three days renounce and throw off wholly and entirely your allegiance to your bishop. We now proclaim our purpose to ye in due season, under our hands, and Count Albrecht von Regenstein's seal."

The assembled lords then subscribed their names to the document, and Poppo sealed the wax seal with the Regen-stein arms.

"That is done!" exclaimed Albrecht. "Now, noble friends, let us all make merry!"

They were not slow to follow his bidding, and soon became merry indeed. They were outspoken men, bold and free, who knew full well where and when to strike in combat, but who in their cups took little heed of what they said.

"Here's to thy beautiful captive, Albrecht!" cried Count Dietrich von Hohnstein. "Thor's thunders! That was not a bad catch, Bock von ~~Schlanstedt~~!"

"And not only the beautiful prisoner, but the beautiful earldom of Falkenstein, which will likewise fall into thy hands," added Count Heinrich von Stolberg.

"It hath not fallen in our hands as yet," replied Albrecht.

"Never fear! We will take care of that!"

"Tell me, ye Regensteins, which of you is to wed the beautiful countess, the eldest or the youngest?" asked Count Burchard.

"I trow ye are all four enamoured of her! Confess now; am I not right?" Count Dietrich inquired, jestingly.

"I am!" laughed Poppo. "I acknowledge it!"

"And I also," his brother Günther added.

"Albrecht and Siegfried are silent," observed Count Heinrich. "That proveth that *they* love her most."

"Now it only remaineth to discover which of us *she* loveth. Albrecht, I believe she loveth thee!" said Poppo.

"Why dost thou talk so, Poppo?" exclaimed his eldest brother, quickly.

"Oh! I have seen her look at thee —"

"Nonsense! Be silent!" interrupted Albrecht, sharply.

"If ye were not brothers," remarked Count Dietrich, "the simplest way to settle the matter would be for ye to fight with one another till there was only one left for her to wed. As it is, ye seem to be in one another's way."

"But yet we *are* brothers," answered Bernhard, severely, "and not one of us can be in the way of the others."

"Well! well! I meant nothing," Count Burchard said, good-naturedly.

With the rapidity of lightning, Albrecht's and Siegfried's eyes met at Count Dietrich's untimely words. What each thought and felt, no one knew. Siegfried remained silent, and Albrecht noticed now for the first time his depressed looks. The talk had been distasteful to him from the outset, and he now said, pointedly, "Enough of this, friends! Countess Oda is my guest as well as yourselves, and I will not have a word more said about her. When we ride to Quedlinburg, we will take her with us to the abbess, for she cannot be here alone."

The conversation now took another turn, and good-fellowship was restored. They sat long at table, till at last Count Burchard and his vassals departed with his son-in-law for the castle of Heimbürg, as Bernhard's guests. The others stayed at Regenstein, each quartered in a

small chamber, and well enough satisfied with the unglazed windows and rude furniture of those primitive days.

When Albrecht lay again, for the first time for five nights, upon his bed, sleep refused to come, notwithstanding the fatigue he had undergone. He thought not of the siege, nor of the risks he had run to preserve his castle, nor yet of the fight which had taken place, any more than of that which was to come; he thought of Oda. She appeared, on his return, so beautiful and winning, that it seemed to him almost impossible to give her up. Might she not, after all, return his affection? She had almost refused to marry Siegfried, and many a time when they were alone, he had seen her cheeks flush, her eyes light up, and such tender words came from her as must have been for him alone.

But in the midst of these blissful memories, the words of Count von Hohnstein rankled in his memory, like poisoned arrows, "Ye seem to be in one another's way."

Dietrich certainly had meant no evil. In the elation of success, he spoke as one who spends his life in rough contests and rivalries. But once said, his words could not be recalled, and rang again in Albrecht's ears. "Accursed words!" he murmured, and turned himself about upon his bed, as if he would turn his back upon them.

At last sleep came to him, but brought with it a frightful dream. He thought he was storming a castle, in order to rescue Oda, who was imprisoned there. Horsemen came to the help of the castle, and he shouted to Siegfried, "Keep them back, till I save Oda!" Siegfried fell upon them with a handful of men and fought well; but as Albrecht returned successful with Oda in his arms, he saw his brother, pierced by a lance, fall from his horse. Siegfried was dead, and Oda was his!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE first thing to be done next morning was to despatch the challenge to the council of Halbertstadt, as well as orders to the Regensteins' several fortresses. Bock asked that five of the "Wicked Seven" — the sixth, Rupfer, was yet disabled by his wounds — should be among those sent on this errand. Before starting, Bock took them aside, and gave them a special charge, of which Count Albrecht knew nothing, but which they received with demonstrations of satisfaction, promising to execute it faithfully.

Then began preparations for the attack upon Quedlinburg. Weapons of all sorts — scaling-ladders, rams, engines for projectiles, pitchy firebrands, and countless bundles of arrows — were brought forth and heaped up in the court-yard. Count Albrecht, Siegfried, Bock, and Klinkhard, the armorer, had their hands full, and the former had no time to think of Oda, who was herself occupied, together with Eilika, in making arrangements for her departure. He was too busy, also, to question Siegfried as to his unusual demeanor, so different from his usual high spirits before a fight. Albrecht did not dwell upon the change in his brother, and what he noticed, he attributed to the talk at table concerning Oda, and he was not wrong. Dietrich's thoughtless words as to their being in one another's way had struck the younger brother even more forcibly than the elder; and since the former's discovery of Oda's love for Albrecht, one thought filled his mind, one question occupied him: Did Albrecht return her love?

The entertainment of the guests was left to Poppo and Günther; and although they had had their share of riding and fighting the day before, and so much more was in store for them, they could not sit still, but hastened to the jousting-court and broke a couple of spears together.

While Eilika helped her mistress to prepare for her short journey, she sighed from time to time so deeply, that Oda finally asked her, —

“What aileth thee, Eilika? Is it so hard for thee to go?”

“In sooth, it is, gracious mistress! It is so pleasant here; and who knoweth that we shall ever come back?”

“We are going where we properly belong, Eilika. Thou canst think we have only taken a roundabout way thither, as the worthy Bock expressed it, when he took us prisoners.”

“Ah! but it is so delightful up here!” repeated the maid. “What have we not enjoyed here, and what happiness might be in store for us, if thou wert willing! Then we should not be forced to leave Regenstein at all.”

Notwithstanding her own sorrow, Oda could not forbear smiling at her maid’s laments.

“Eilika,” said she, “dost thou find it hard to say farewell to the doughty knight? Why doth he not try to keep thee?”

“We wait for thee to set us an example,” answered Eilika. “We cannot understand why thou shouldst not become Countess von Regenstein, for it only resteth with thee.”

“Do not speak of this again, Eilika,” said Oda, turning away in displeasure.

Eilika sighed over her stony-heartedness, and went on arranging her mistress’s wardrobe in silence.

After a time she began again, “What sort of life shall

we lead with the abbess, my lady? Will it be like any other convent?"

"Did the abbess and her friend look as if it were so, when they were here?"

"Nay; they certainly did not," laughed Eilika. "And Master Florencius, the scrivener —"

"Well, what of him?"

"He dwelleth likewise at the castle, and is merrier and more comely than the knight Bock."

"So, thou art already thinking of consolation?"

"Ah! dear mistress, one must have pastime."

"Well, if thou countest upon amusing thyself with Florencius at the castle, at least do not lament that thou hast to leave Regenstein," observed Oda, shortly.

Oda forced herself to chat and jest with Eilika over the preparations for departure, that she might distract her thoughts. For, in truth, her heart was heavy. Eilika was right: what joy had come to her?

Brought to Regenstein as a captive, she had been here nearly five months, happy and contented in the present, scarcely thinking of the future, but which again confronted her in its grim reality, now that her beautiful dream had vanished. Her hero, whom she had allowed herself to love with her whole heart, was about to disappear from her in the turmoil of battle. If she ever saw him again, it would be when he came to claim another as his bride, the beautiful abbess, at whose nuptial rites in the old convent church she might, perchance, bear a burning taper. What remained to her now? Nothing but memories! And to fix them in her mind, she climbed once again to the stone seat, to let her eyes rest on the picture which she had so often looked at with delight, and might see no more. She knew she would be undisturbed, for to-day Count Albrecht had hardly a look for her.

Since early morning, nothing but brief commands had issued from the lips of the count. In the afternoon, when the preparations for departure were finished, he said to his trusty lieutenant, "Have the messengers all returned?"

"Not all; three are still away."

"Who carried the challenge to Halberstadt?"

"Nothnagel; but he hath not yet come back."

"They cannot have detained him by force?"

"Hardly, Sir Count; at all events, they have not captured him alive."

Count Albrecht was of the same opinion, knowing of what stuff the man was made. Without further anxiety for Nothnagel, therefore, he went into the stables to convince himself that the horses were thoroughly shod. Bock betook himself to his hermit's cell, to make his own simple preparation for the march. Toward evening, the three missing messengers returned. Bock came out to meet them, as they dismounted from their horses.

"It is done," said Nothnagel. "I delivered the letter at the Johann's gate."

"What said they?"

"We might come as soon as we liked; they were ready for us."

"The devil take them! We will smoke them like hams! And the other charge?" continued Bock.

"That hath been attended to likewise. He swingeth," answered Nothnagel.

"From a willow-tree," Hasenbart added; and they laughed, diabolically.

Bock went to his master with his news. "Thy letter hath been delivered, Sir Count. The three have returned."

"What hath kept the churls so long?" asked Albrecht.

Bock hesitated. "They have done their duty, Sir Count."

"They deserve no thanks for that! Where were they?"

"They had a little message from me to—to an old acquaintance," stammered Bock.

"To whom, Bock; to whom?"

"To Hinze Habernack."

Count Albrecht, pointing his finger at him, said, "Bock, Bock, I do not ask what hath been done. I fear me it was an evil deed."

"Sir Count," returned the latter, firmly, "I take the sin upon my own soul."

But he lingered, and Albrecht saw that he had something on his mind.

"What aileth thee?" he asked.

"Sir Count, the templar knocked loudly this evening."

"Again?" exclaimed Albrecht. "Hath any one else heard it?"

"I think not."

"Be silent, then, and see that none linger about the place. They will take it for an evil portent, and that is not well when one is going to meet the enemy. Dost understand?"

Bock nodded, and turned his steps toward the dark hollow. There he sat for a long time upon a rock, guarding the ill-omened spot, and listening with gloomy thoughts to the unearthly sounds. The night was dark, not a star shone down upon the lonely watcher, and the wind moaned mournfully about the nooks and corners of the old castle.

As Count Albrecht and his friends with their followers rode next morning to Quedlinburg, the spectacle was one to rejoice a soldier's heart. Pennons fluttered, helmets glittered in the sun, weapons clashed, accoutrements rattled, and horses snorted and pawed the ground. The men-at-arms sang, and indulged in all sorts of pranks, for they were elated at the prospect of storming and plunder-

ing the city, and hoped to return with rare booty. The eight counts rode at their head, and Oda with them.

"Thou art the first maiden, Countess Oda, who hath been escorted by men-at-arms to the convent," said Count von Stolberg.

"And will ye all accompany me to the abbess?" asked she, with a smile.

"Nay," he answered; "we turn to the right at the foot of the hill, and ride to —"

"We will spare Countess Jutta the alarm of seeing her castle invested by men-at-arms," interrupted Albrecht, for he feared Count Heinrich would let Oda know that the goal of their expedition was Falkenstein. "Siegfried shall conduct Countess Oda to the abbess."

Neither Siegfried nor Oda were well pleased with this plan, but neither dared make any objection.

Eilika rode behind her mistress with the men who led the pack-horses; and Bock came trotting up to her, saying, "Dost thou recognize this as the way by which we rode together to Regenstein?"

"I have not noticed the road; I have had eyes only for thee, Sir Knight," answered the roguish girl.

"I have not forgotten it," he replied, considerably flattered, "and I hope soon to ride back by thy side. Meanwhile, fare thee well, and forget me not!"

As the armed body approached Quedlinburg, the tocsin sounded, and they soon saw head after head appear over the breastworks. The gates were fastened, and the bridges drawn up. The town was prepared for a conflict with the Regensteins, before the challenge was sent, and were on the watch for any signs of the advancing foe.

Soldiers, citizens, women, and children mounted the walls to behold their enemies and discover their strength, but the helpless non-combatants soon disappeared.

Count Albrecht ordered a halt on the Münzenburg, a couple of how-shots from the gates, and the counts of Stolberg, Hohnstein, and Mansfeld took leave of the Regensteins and Countess Oda, promising to send tidings of their success; and Count Stolberg said to Oda, "My cousin, Coun'ess Luitgard, is in the convent chapter. I pray thee greet her for me." They then departed with their followers, on the way to Falkenstein.

Count Albrecht divided his forces, and stationed them at different points under the command of his brothers, for the investment of the city. He was not able to surround it entirely, for he deemed it unsafe to separate his men by too great distances, considering it best, with his moderate force, to make unexpected assaults at different gates.

In bidding Oda farewell, he grasped her hand, saying, "God bless thee, Countess Oda! Thou canst observe our movements from the castle. As soon as I can, I will come up and visit thee. Say so to the abbess. Farewell, till we meet again."

"God have thee in his keeping, Count Albrecht," she answered, heartily, and rode off with Siegfried, Eilika, and two mounted soldiers, and the men with the pack-horses followed them at a short distance.

As they ascended the steep hillside, Siegfried said, "Countess Oda, let us take leave of each other here, where no one can observe us. God knows and thou knowest that I love thee more, far more, than I can tell. For a time, I lived in hope, but it was a short dream. Thou lovest my brother, and I believe he loveth thee, though I do not know it. If he should offer thee his hand, accept it, and mayest thou be happy! And when thou comest to dwell at Regenstein, think of me, and —" But here his voice failed him.

Oda, who had listened to his words, deeply grieved, now

said to him, "Count Siegfried, I thank thee for the affection which thou hast shown me; my destiny is in God's hand; but if we come together again, let us remain good, loving friends, Siegfried, as we have been during all the happy days at Regenstein."

She held out her hand, but he would not allow himself to take it. "We shall never see each other again in this world, Countess Oda! This is a long farewell, and it is well, for I cannot live without thee. I have now but one wish, that thou shouldst make Albrecht happy!"

She did not understand his words, and replied, quietly, "Why should we not meet again, Count Siegfried? Wait a little, and sunshine will once more come to thee. If I can help thy noble brother, it will give me joy. I will serve him in every way I can!"

She offered him her hand again, and now he took and pressed it fervently.

"We are here," he said. "Show the abbess a friendly countenance, and I counsel thee, for Albrecht's sake, let her not see that thou lovest him."

The inmates of the castle had seen their approach, and Florencius received them in the court-yard, and conducted them up the steps. The abbess and canoness met them above, and bade them welcome. Jutta was pleased to see Oda in Siegfried's care, and thought to herself, "He commits his betrothed to my keeping till the fighting is over, and he can take her home as his bride!" "And Count Albrecht?" she inquired. "Had he not time to come?"

"Nay, my lady," returned Siegfried, "it was not possible; but he sendeth thee greeting."

"And will see thee as soon as he can," added Oda.

"Thou also wilt be welcome at all times, Count Siegfried," said the abbess.

"I thank thee, my lady," replied he.

The abbess and Adelheid turned aside, and spoke together in low tones, not to interfere with the lovers' farewell; but they were brief.

"Farewell, dear, dear Oda!" exclaimed Siegfried.

"Farewell, Siegfried!" she answered, full of pity.

One more pressure of the hand, one long look, a mute bow to the two ladies, and Siegfried was gone.

Jutta and Adelheid each took one of Oda's hands, and the abbess said, "Come, dear Oda, we will conduct thee to thy room. From thy windows thou canst see Regenstein. Later, I will summon the sisters of the chapter, for they have all anxiously awaited thy coming."

"And also not without curiosity," added Adelheid, smiling.

Siegfried rode slowly down the hill to Albrecht's camp, and seeing his brother from afar, he put spurs to his horse, and galloped toward him. As he drew his sword and brandished it, he looked, with his shining armor and fair, flowing locks, like the youthful St. George.

"Here I am, Albrecht!" he cried, in a loud, excited voice. "Now send me wherever the fight will be hottest!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE result of the siege of Quedlinburg was not at all in accordance with Count Albrecht's hopes, for the brave city proved far more difficult to vanquish than he had imagined. The repeated assaults upon the different gates were valiantly repulsed, and two conflagrations, kindled by explosives thrown into the city, were quickly extinguished, so that the besiegers had as yet gained no signal advantage.

The count was consequently in a very bad humor, and the visit to the castle, which on Jutta's account he was constrained and on Oda's he was fain to make, he cut as short as possible.

Mindful of Siegfried's words, Oda was shy and reserved, but appeared contented with the abbess and the other inmates of the convent. Jutta attributed the blunt, almost unfriendly, demeanor of Count Albrecht to his chagrin at his ill-success, and volunteered her services as peacemaker between him and the city, but her offer was declined. His resentment toward the town increased daily, as he found himself no nearer its reduction, and powerless to revenge himself for the blackened ruins of Gunteckenburg.

Siegfried neither accompanied his elder brother on his visit to the castle, nor did he go alone. Count Albrecht fancied that he had declared to Oda, or perchance had bound himself by a vow, not to see her till he could come as victor. He asked him no questions, but this conjecture was strengthened by Siegfried's eager offers of service on

every occasion, and by his impatient desire that the Quedlinburgers might sally forth and give battle in the open field.

But this they were in no haste to do. The bishop and the cities of Halberstadt and Aschersleben must soon come to their help, and consequently they waited. When they perceived their allies advancing, they would then sally from the gates and try their strength with the enemy, but till then they prudently held themselves aloof. They kept a vigilant watch, however, guarded all their gates, and calmly beheld the enemy's tents by day and his camp-fires by night. The Regensteins could not starve them out, though they had cut off their communication with the outer world, and had captured a train of wagons laden with merchandise, which was destined for Quedlinburg, and was coming from Nordhausen, by the old high road over the Hartz. This made the long delay of the expected succor more irksome.

Count Albrecht, on the other hand, was well satisfied, and his satisfaction soon increased.

The letter to the council of Halberstadt had had the desired effect, even beyond Count Albrecht's most sanguine hopes; the bishop had been driven from the city, and obliged to seek refuge in flight.

It happened in this wise: Albrecht von Regenstein was beloved by the common people, far and wide, because he never maltreated them, like other feudal lords, but protected them against their oppressors. The bishop, on the other hand, had few friends among them, as he vigorously demanded his tithes and revenues; thus it was that the mass of the people took the count's side, when the quarrel between them became known.

Upon the arrival of the letter which threatened Quedlinburg with great danger, by reason of the bishop, the artisans and poorer townsfolk in Halberstadt rose up in

insurrection. The town council and wealthy citizens did little or nothing to suppress it, partly because they lacked power, or feared for their lives and property; partly because they were willing that the bishop should receive a severe lesson for his haughty demeanor and his interference with the government of the city. The insurrection was secretly encouraged by his enemies in the chapter, and the excited populace threatening to storm the episcopal palace; there was nothing for the bishop to do but to flee from Halberstadt. He had escaped by night, either to his fortress of Hornburg, on the Ilse, or to the castle of Wiedelah, whence he could easily reach the Hartzburg, the well-fortified stronghold of the counts of Wernigerode.

This intelligence was extremely welcome to Count Albrecht, for though he was far from imagining that the fugitive bishop would sit down and fold his hands, he was glad to be left unmolested for the present, and he hoped that under these circumstances Halberstadt might be unwilling to send aid to the Quedlinburgers.

The news which he received from his allies was also very gratifying. The garrison of Falkenstein, for its honor's sake, and for the credit of its loyalty to its lord, had held out for three days before surrendering, whereupon Count Hoyer and his pious wife and chaplain had reluctantly withdrawn. Their successors established themselves comfortably in the beautiful fortress, and amused themselves by following the chase in the neighboring forest. They concluded their message to Count Albrecht by asking if he wished their help. If not, they would continue to hold Falkenstein — in other words, go on with their hunting and carousing — till he or one of his brothers relieved them. In that case, would Count Burchard and his men go on to seize the territory of Arnstein, an appendage of the earldom of Falkenstein?

Albrecht understood what this meant. Arnstein, with its castle, bordered on Burchard's earldom of Mansfeld, and if he wished to seize it, he undoubtedly meant to do so for his own benefit.

But Count Albrecht could not refuse his ally this reward for the valuable assistance he had rendered him. Moreover, Count Albrecht wished to show the Quedlinburgers that he was quite strong enough to chastise them single-handed, so that in future they might have a proper respect for his authority.

Therefore he assured his friends that he did not need their aid. Burchard might occupy Arnstein if he pleased, and Heinrich and Dietrich could remain at Falkenstein till he should send to relieve them, which he hoped might be soon. But he desired them to keep a vigilant watch upon the city of Aschersleben, so that he should not be taken by surprise, and to persuade the princes of Anhalt, especially Bernhard, to join in the alliance against the bishop.

The negligence on the part of the other cities appeared suspicious to the Quedlinburgers, and they determined to learn whether they would adhere to their agreement, and why they did not send succor to Quedlinburg. As the city was incompletely invested, messengers were despatched in the night through a postern gate, and passed through the enemy's camp, returning the next night.

In this way the citizens of Quedlinburg heard the story of the bishop's expulsion. But the burgomaster and council of Halberstadt declared they had no intention of breaking their covenant, and would not leave their sister city in the lurch, could they only hold out a few days longer. The council was negotiating with the bishop in regard to his return. They would send a force of horse and foot soldiers to their aid as soon as possible, and announce its approach by a flag on one of the towers of

Halberstadt. The Quedlinburgers must keep watch, and make a sortie at the right time upon the enemy.

The message from Aschersleben sounded less favorable. They assured their allies that they could not come to their aid, for the counts of Stolberg and Hohnstein barred the way; the besieged must therefore be patient, and wait for aid from Halberstadt. Aschersleben, it seemed, had deserted them in their need.

Even from the highest tower of Quedlinburg the road from Halberstadt was hidden by surrounding hills, but the signal tower of Halberstadt was visible, though not to the besiegers. Through the whole Hartz were scattered ten such watch-towers, whence one could see and signal far and wide, but the townsfolk looked long before they could see the flag fluttering on the Halberstadt tower.

Meantime Count Albrecht continued his efforts to break into the city. Once his men almost succeeded; the High gate was forced, and the Regensteins were already half through it when they were driven back by a shower of arrows and stones, boiling water and oil. Albrecht's anger at his failure now increased daily.

Finally, at the last moment, he received the menacing intelligence that the bishop, after much negotiation, had returned to Halberstadt and been welcomed by the fickle citizens. But worse than this was the news that they were coming in considerable force to the assistance of the beleaguered town, and might be expected to appear at any time before the walls.

Albrecht well knew how his enemies thirsted for revenge, and he posted his sentinels at once upon the nearest hills.

As he stood one morning, with his three younger brothers and Bock, near the Gröper gate, he noticed a lively commotion upon the walls, which indicated that

something unusual was about to happen; perchance a sortie.

At that moment messengers arrived, announcing the approach of the Halberstadt troops; the main body was at some distance, but a vanguard of horsemen was already on the Liebfranken hill.

"We must force them back, or in any case delay them until we know what this commotion meaneth," declared Count Albrecht.

Then, looking at Siegfried, he said, briefly, "Siegfried, thou must go to meet them; fall upon them in the narrow pass of the Weinberg, and hold them back as long as thou hast a man left!"

"That will be a hot piece of work for Count Siegfried, my lord," interposed Bock. "A fight in the pass will be a bloody matter, and we know not yet the strength—"

"It cannot be helped!" exclaimed Albrecht; "it must be done, and thou must go with him."

Siegfried ordered the trumpeters to sound "to horse," and with the "light of battle" in his eyes, he rode away with Bock and his mail-clad horsemen.

The count then turned to his two other brothers. "Günther, thou must guard the High gate; Bernhard remaineth at the Ohringer gate, and thou, Poppo, stayest here! Keep up communication with one another, and help one another in case of need. If ye can spare any men, send them to Siegfried's aid; if ye must retire, do so in this direction. Should a retreat be necessary, fly toward Gersdorf!"

"And Siegfried?" asked Poppo; "shall he be left with only his handful of men, in the defile? He will never retreat, but—"

"I will follow him, as soon as all is in readiness here," answered Albrecht.

Günther and Poppo stationed themselves at their posts, and awaited the foe.

Albrecht sent a rider to repeat his orders to Bernhard, and then halted upon a hill with a body of his foot-soldiers, whence he could overlook the field of battle.

Siegfried galloped at the head of his men toward Halberstadt. He said nothing, but looked about him with a feverish glance, first to the peaceful blue sky, then toward the forest and Regenstein. And as he entered the narrow pass of the Weinberg, he turned toward the castle and waved his hand, as if in final farewell.

A few moments later, in a bend of the defile, he came directly upon the men of Halberstadt. Siegfried raised himself in the stirrups, brandished his sword, and cried aloud, "Forward! Victory or death!"

The troops rushed upon one another in a hand-to-hand encounter, and fought fiercely; swords clashed, and maces and battle-axes fell heavily on helmet and shield. Both sides struggled obstinately, and the combatants were mingled in wild confusion. Where the contest was hottest, there was Siegfried, while Bock endeavored to keep by his side, risking his life repeatedly in his efforts to protect his chief.

Finally the Regensteins were victorious, and the men of Halberstadt turned and fled, the victors following in mad pursuit.

In the defile all was now still. The dead and dying, with sword or lance still held in their stiffened grasp, lay side by side, and there among them was the youngest, the flower of the house of Regenstein, slowly breathing out his life. He had fallen upon his back and was looking up to the sky, the left hand pressed upon the breast; a peaceful expression rested upon his face.

And now came Bock, rushing back to the scene of the

struggle. He had missed Siegfried, and returned in haste to seek him. Finding him thus on the ground, Bock flung himself out of the saddle, crying, "Count Siegfried, art thou wounded?"

"A stab in the breast," answered Siegfried, weakly.

"Well, well," said Bock, more distressed than he chose to show. "All wounds heal quickly at thy age."

Siegfried moved his head a little. "Nay, Bock, not all. Faithful friend, come nearer! I have a secret to tell thee, — it must not be buried with me."

"Count Siegfried!" cried Bock, "God in heaven! —" but he could go no further. The old knight had seen too many men laid low, not to know full well the look on Siegfried's face.

"Come close, Bock, — listen. Countess Oda hath confessed that she loveth — not me — but Albrecht. Tell him, Bock, when I am dead, — hearest thou, — only to him, to no other, — I could not."

"It shall be done, Count Siegfried, if I live," answered Bock, cut to the heart. Tears came to the eyes of the hardened veteran, and coursed down his wrinkled cheeks. He half lifted, half dragged his young master to the border of the road, and laid him on the grassy slope.

"Thank thee!" sighed Siegfried. "Farewell, old friend. Go now, Bock! Let no one through the pass!"

Bock could stay no longer; he must return to his men, and saw, alas, only too clearly, that he could do nothing. He grasped Siegfried's hand with a groan, then clenching his teeth, he sprang into the saddle and dashed away.

The sortie of the Quedlinburgers from the Ohringer, Gröper, and High gates was feeble and spiritless; and when Count Albrecht saw that his men presented a firm front to the enemy, he turned with his foot-soldiers toward

the Weinberg. As he rode slowly at their head, a sort of panic seized him as regards his brother. He had sent Siegfried against the foe, and ordered him to hold out to the last. Siegfried had shown a reckless courage throughout the siege; what would he do now, urged on by such orders as these? It might be that he had sent his brother to his death. His dream recurred to him, and his anxiety increased with every step. He urged his horse into a trot, then into a gallop, spurring him on till at last he left the road and swept across the open country, as if driven by avenging spirits, toward the pass. Soon he reached the ill-fated spot, where lay the body of his brother beside the road; whether living or dead, he knew not.

"Siegfried! Siegfried! Merciful Father!" he cried, then sprang from his horse, and bent over the prostrate form.

Siegfried looked at him with clouded eyes; a painful smile flitted over the pale face, and he said, softly, "We have conquered, Albrecht, but it hath cost thee a brother!"

"Siegfried! Oh! my God! And I have sent thee to thy death!"

"Nay, nay," whispered the other.

Albrecht knelt down, gazing into his brother's face. "My dream! My dream! Why was I not warned by it!" he moaned.

Siegfried did not understand him. He attempted to give Albrecht his hand, but was too weak. Albrecht took it tenderly, and thought he felt a slight pressure. Siegfried tried to motion his brother to come yet nearer, as he was not able to raise his voice, "Albrecht, greet Oda for me; now am I—no longer in thy way," he gasped.

"Siegfried! what sayest thou? Siegfried! Thou must not think thou wast ever in my way," cried Albrecht. "I wished to make thee happy, thee and Oda!"

Siegfried could hear him no more. But Albrecht, holding him in his arms, heard him yield up his latest breath.

The company of foot-soldiers had in the mean time reached the pass, and stood whispering in the road at a little distance, awed by the grief of their leader. They asked him for no instructions, and he gave them none, and hardly recognized their presence. Overpowered by grief, he forgot everything but the brother whose lifeless head lay upon his lap. Beyond the Weinberg, the fugitives, pursued by Bock and his men, turned aside from the road, and took to the open fields, still followed by the Regenstein horse. Finally the latter gave up the chase, but could not return by the way they had come, for the main body of the Halberstadt troops had now come up, and cut off their retreat in that direction.

The contest before the city walls resulted badly for the Regensteins. The first sally of the Quedlinburgers from two of their gates was only intended to deceive their enemies and keep them occupied. Out of the middle, the Gröper gate, they poured in unlooked-for strength, drove back Poppo and his men, and separated Bernhard and Günther, assailing them both at once, while now, also in great numbers, they sallied forth from the Ohringer and High gates. The besiegers were overmatched, and, indeed, routed. A body of Halberstadt soldiers had gone around the Weinberg and intercepted Poppo and Günther, both of whom were retreating, slightly wounded, so that they were forced with their followers to fly toward Westerhausen. On the way, Bock overtook them, bringing the terrible tidings of Siegfried's fall. Thereupon they set out for the Weinberg pass, in order to save their brother or his dead body from the hands of the enemy. Where Albrecht and Bernhard were, they knew not.

Siegfried's impetuous ride had been witnessed from the

Quedlinburg towers, and Count Albrecht was seen to follow, and a body of troops had been sent after him.

At full gallop, Count Albrecht came out of the pass, and behind him, in pursuit, came twenty of the bishop's men.

At the first glance, he saw that the day was lost, and his troops completely routed. The nearest way to the fortress of Gersdorf passed Quedlinburg, and he took it, trusting to the speed of his horse. He must needs approach the Ohringer gate, and this settled his fate. He encountered there a number of horsemen who had taken no part in the fight, and whose horses, therefore, were fresh. They observed the count's flight toward Gersdorf, and gave chase so hotly that in his distress he plunged into a morass, from which his exhausted horse was unable to extricate himself.

Immediately he was surrounded by his enemies, several of whom boldly ventured into the quagmire. There a desperate struggle took place, Count Albrecht defending himself like a wild boar, but he was overpowered at last and wounded in the right arm.

Then an almost incredible thing happened: Count Albrecht von Regenstein was taken prisoner by the Quedlinburgers.

Like fire amongst thatch spread the cry, "We have him! we have him!" till it reached the gates of the city, where a thousand voices took it up, and shouted in triumph, "The robber count is caught! The robber count cometh a prisoner!"

Notwithstanding all his exertions, Bernhard had been unable to cut his way through to Poppo, and withdrew, fighting, in accordance with Albrecht's instructions, in the direction of Castle Gersdorf. But seeing in the distance a rider hotly pursued, whom he thought must be his

eldest brother, he tried to go to his aid. But in vain: he was once more beaten back, though not pursued.

The fighting was now at an end; the power of the Regensteins was broken and apparently destroyed. The victors were abundantly satisfied, and paid no further heed to the detached bodies of the enemy scattered here and there.

As soon as Bernhard perceived this, he determined not to continue on to Gersdorf, but to follow at some distance the procession which accompanied the captive into the city. Full of sadness and anxiety, he rode slowly after his brother.

“O Albrecht, Albrecht!” he groaned; “thou desiredst to rule everywhere, and a prison cell is the end. And what will come of it? All for the sake of the maiden captured on this very spot! Oh! that we had never seen her!”

He resolved to find his three other brothers, of whom he had seen and heard nothing since morning; and putting his tired horse into a trot, he rode around the city. At last he descried them with Bock, approaching from the Weinberg, and attended by a small troop of soldiers, bearing with them a wounded man. No, alas! it was a dead body, Siegfried's. And when he rode up and recognized the too well known features, he found himself immediately obliged to tell his brothers the woful news, that Albrecht was a prisoner.

Their cup was now full. They rode on almost broken-hearted, with Siegfried's remains, to the Wiperti monastery, no one molesting the gloomy procession. They laid the body upon a bier before the altar in the monastery church, first removing the armor to discover Siegfried's wound, when they found on his breast a withered wreath of oak-leaves and ivy, fastened with an embroidered band.

The brothers recognized it, and reverently left it untouched. A soldier and a monk watched the dead, and a messenger was sent to the Michaelstein monastery to prepare the tomb.

In Quedlinburg the townsfolk flocked into the streets, upon the towers, and to the open windows, to see the captured count pass by. The cortege was long. First came the captain of the city forces. Then a body of foot-soldiers, bearing spears and the city banner. Behind them was the prisoner surrounded by those who had captured him, and these, succeeded by the bishop's horsemen, who had pursued him through the pass, from beside his brother's body, and finally followed the rest of the men-at-arms of both cities. With a face like an iron mask, Count Albrecht strode on, not lifting his eyes from the ground. A few of the spectators observed a respectful silence, but most of them greeted him with loud murmurs and execrations. In the market-place the multitude heaved to and fro like waves of the sea. Upon the broad Town House steps the burgomasters and council were assembled. Their dark looks boded no good to the count, as he passed on without looking up. No word was spoken; the narrow chamber was ready for its occupant, and he allowed himself to be led into it without resistance; the massive door clanged behind him, locks and bolts were fastened, and he was alone.

Darkness fell upon this ill-starred day. In the prior's cell at St. Wiperti's the three brothers sat with Bock, in earnest consultation. They decided to remain where they were over night, and in the morning Bernhard would begin his efforts to negotiate with the council for Albrecht's release, and beg the intercession of the abbess. Bock declared that he would not leave the monastery while his master was a prisoner.

Later, an emissary of the council arrived, and desired to speak with Beruhard, whose presence in the monastery had become known. The messenger declared that the burgomaster and council required the cessation of further hostilities on the part of the Regensteins and their allies. At the first attack upon the city, or any attempt to free the prisoner by force, Count Albrecht's head would fall by the hand of the executioner.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN the evening, soon after Count Albrecht's entry into the city, Master Willekin von Herrkestorf arrived at the convent, and acquainted the abbess with the wonderful news. She and her ladies had watched the course of events all day from the castle, and had seen that the Regensteins were worsted, but had regarded the defeat as one of the accidents of war, which brings victory to-day and reverse to-morrow. Now, at the news of the chancellor, which he was obliged to repeat twice before she would believe it, the abbess's anger was boundless at the unheard-of audacity of the Quedlinburgers in capturing their feudal lord. She demanded his release, and wished to send the chancellor at once with this message. Master Willekin with difficulty suppressed a sardonic smile, as he answered that the honorable council would hardly hasten to grant such a request.

"At least, let them give him a suitable prison," she urged. "Let him be sent to my castle, requiring him to pledge his word that he will not leave it till he hath paid his ransom."

The chancellor could give her little hope, intimating that it was doubtful if the count would be released by the payment of ransom.

"What meanest thou?" asked the abbess. "They would not trample upon the laws of honorable warfare!"

"They talk of a tribunal beneath the linden-tree," answered Master Willekin.

"What, Master Chancellor! The city presumeth to talk of holding a court beneath the linden-tree! I will

appeal to the Emperor ! But thou dost not represent the city. Let the burgomaster and council come to me themselves. We shall know how to make terms with them ! ”

Thereupon the angry princess dismissed her chancellor.

Only the older and sober-minded citizens spoke of a court of justice ; the others, including the mass of the common people, desired that the count might be put to death without more ado.

The council held a session in the evening, principally to consider how to secure his safe-keeping, and resolved to have a dungeon built for this purpose, to preclude the possibility of escape, as some said, and others, to prevent the people from breaking into his prison and slaying him. The honor of constructing it fell to the master of the carpenters' guild.

In the city the rejoicing still continued. Crowds lingered in the streets and market-place, and discussed the wonderful event, and feasting and drinking lasted far into the night.

In the convent chapter there was a divided feeling. The superior, Countess Kunigunde, and the deaconess, Gertrude von Meinersen, had often been the objects of his jests, and had suffered many slights on his account from the abbess. They therefore rejoiced in Albrecht's downfall, and, to vex Jutta, made no secret of their satisfaction. The others expressed deep and sincere pity for his fate. But their sorrow was as nothing compared with Oda's, although she was more skilful in hiding her feelings than the abbess, whose indignation at the Quedlinburgers was even greater than her grief. While comforting herself with the hope that Albrecht's life was in no danger, Oda was well-nigh broken-hearted when she thought of the great man laid low, and at the mercy of his enemies. She controlled herself before the others, especially before

the abbess, determined not to betray her love for the count, as she had done so sadly to Siegfried on the morning after Albrecht's descent from the castle.

Early the next day, Count Bernhard came to the abbess, and found her sitting with Countess Adelheid and Oda. He related all that had happened, and offered his services on behalf of the convent, in his brother's stead. Jutta thanked him, but Bernhard saw that she regarded Albrecht's imprisonment as promising to be of short duration. But he soon dispelled this error. Already, early in the morning, he had sent to the burgomaster, begging for a safe-conduct and an interview with him, and asking permission to see his brother. These requests were refused, and it was declared that no negotiations could be considered, the council not having decided upon its action toward the prisoner.

"Albrecht's fate is trembling in the balance," concluded Bernhard, "and I come to thee, my lady, to ask earnestly for thy immediate mediation and assistance."

"I will do everything in my power, Sir Count!" exclaimed the abbess, in consternation at the distressing tidings. "But where are thine allies? If thou shouldst again summon thy forces, and with the counts of Mansfeld, Stolberg, and Hohnstein —"

"The fighting is over," he interposed. "I have told our friends that they may withdraw, for we are threatened that upon the first renewal of hostilities, my brother's head shall be exposed upon the walls of the town."

The ladies turned pale, and Oda barely escaped swooning.

"Let me first treat with the burgomaster and council," said the abbess. "They cannot refuse me an interview. Then shalt thou hear from me, Sir Count. Are thy three brothers uninjured?"

“My three brothers?” repeated Bernhard, astonished.
“Hast thou not heard, my lady —”

“What, prithee?”

“That only two of them are living; my brother Siegfried hath fallen.”

He spoke bitterly, and threw, perhaps unwittingly, a lowering glance upon Oda.

At this moment Siegfried's parting words came back to her like a flash, “We shall never see each other again in this world.” Did he have a foreboding of his death, or had he, in sooth, sought it? It was an unbearable thought. Oda was so agitated that she lost all self-control, and covering her face, burst into tears.

The others also were deeply moved, and looked at Oda with hearty sympathy.

“Siegfried dead!” Jutta said, softly; “cut down in the flower of his youth! How happened it?”

“Albrecht sent him against a troop of horsemen in the Weinberg pass,” answered Bernhard; “ordering him to hold it without fail, and on no account to let a foeman fight his way through. Siegfried obeyed the command to the letter, but it was a desperate undertaking.”

“How could Count Albrecht despatch his brother on such an enterprise?”

“I was not present at the time,” replied Bernhard.

Jutta looked searchingly at Count Bernhard, and then, as if by a rapid association of ideas, she glanced at Oda.

“When will ye lay him to rest?” she asked.

“The funeral will take place at noon, the day after to-morrow, at the Michaelstein monastery,” answered Bernhard.

“We will be present — we three,” said the abbess; “shall we not?”

“Certainly,” replied Adelheid.

Oda bowed her head silently.

Bernhard then bade the ladies farewell. And the abbess, turning to Adelheid and Oda, said, "I must pray you to leave me now, for I must consider carefully what I shall say to the council."

Accordingly they took their leave, and Jutta was left alone with her thoughts. Bernhard's story of Siegfried's death had made an impression upon her, from which she could not free herself. A terrible suspicion possessed her, and she tried in vain to thrust it aside. However submissively she might bow to the decree of Providence, however she might appreciate the uncertainty of war, which brings to naught the best-laid plans, the stubborn fact remained, that by Siegfried's death Oda had become free. And could it be that in order to possess her himself, Albrecht had — Nay, nay; away with the frightful thought!

But if a mutual affection really existed between Albrecht and Oda, as she had formerly suspected, what was to hinder them from taking advantage of a decree of Providence to join hands in wedlock? And should she release Albrecht from prison, would she be doing so for herself or for Oda? He was bound to her by no vows; she knew not if he loved her enough to marry her, had Oda never come between them. Nor did she know if the latter loved Albrecht, or would wed the eldest brother, now that the youngest had gone. She resolved to sound Oda's heart, and devised a plan for doing so which was not devoid of harshness, but by which she thought she might attain her end.

She determined to leave no stone unturned in her efforts to procure the count's freedom, and at the same time to let him know that he had her alone to thank for his release, should she haply succeed in obtaining it.

She awaited impatiently the visit of the burgomaster, whom she had sent for through Master Willekin. He came the next day, accompanied by the councillor, Werner Scheerenschmid.

When asked by the abbess on what conditions they would free Count Albrecht, the burgomaster replied, firmly, "On no conditions, gracious princess. The greater part of the townsfolk and several of the councillors demand that Count Albrecht von Regenstein shall be put to death, and those who would spare his life insist upon the necessity of keeping him a captive, that the city may have peace."

The abbess was deeply indignant, but restraining herself, said, "Why not release him, on condition of his taking a solemn oath to end his feud with the city?"

Master Nikolaus shook his head. "Such vows have been broken before now, my lady. If we allow the count to live, we must keep him in our hands as a hostage for the conduct of his brothers and allies, and his head must pay the forfeit if our peace is disturbed."

"Can I not act as mediator between ye, and bring about some happy agreement?" Jutta asked, anxiously.

"We have already decided upon our course," answered the burgomaster. "The tribunal of the high tree will find the sentence."

"The tribunal of the high tree?" cried the abbess. "How can ye speak of it? It is for me to invoke it; it is my prerogative."

"There was no other way open for us, gracious princess," said the burgomaster. "The city magistrate cannot execute justice upon the count."

"Justice! His is the justice, yours the injustice," stormed the abbess.

"The noble judges of the high-tree tribunal will decide."

"Then is he already condemned!"

"Justice will be done him," said the burgomaster. "We have sent a message to Duke Otto, of Brunswick, to convoke the court."

"Ye have sent!" exclaimed the abbess. "Ye mean that ye ask my permission to send Duke Otto the message!"

"We have already sent it, my lady."

"Without consulting me?"

Nikolaus von Bekheim coldly assented.

"We knew thy opinion, without asking, gracious princess," answered Werner Scheerenschmid.

"And the Duke of Brunswick, the brother of the bishop, Count Albrecht's worst foe, is to pronounce the sentence? And that is what ye call justice?"

"The people call him 'Otto, the Mild,'" replied Master Nikolaus.

"I also have a seat and voice in the court of nobles, Burgomaster. I bid ye farewell till we meet under the high tree." And she turned away, more indignant than at first.

Further words were useless; the court of justice had been summoned, and there was nothing to do but await the issue. The principal thing must be to avert the death sentence. As long as Count Albrecht should live, even were he in prison, his release might be possible by stratagem, bribery, or force, and Jutta also built hopes upon the fickleness of the common people.

The next day, at the appointed time, the abbess, with Adelheid and Oda, the chancellor and the scrivener, together with some of the castle servitors, all on horseback, halted in a glade of the forest at the foot of Regenstein, where Siegfried's body had been brought. Jutta looked little like a mourner. At intervals she directed

scrutinizing glances at Oda, and was restless and absent, and her two companions judged from her manner that she had some project in her mind. Soon the funeral procession, on foot, wound slowly down the hill, and was joined by the others, who had now dismounted.

Eight armed men, of those who had fought at Siegfried's side in the pass, bore the garlanded coffin, behind which walked Bock, with two soldiers, carrying helmet, sword, and shield, and after them the armorer Klinkhard, leading Siegfried's horse. Then came Bernhard, with his wife, Reginhild, Ulrich, Poppo, and Günther; the abbess, and her companions, Master Willekin and Florencius, following; soldiers and serving-men closed the procession.

So they bore the body of the young hero through the bright autumn woods where he had so often hunted, so lately wandered by Oda's side.

At a bend of the pathway they met the white-bearded abbot of Michaelstein, with his monks, and now the slow tolling of the monastery bell broke the stillness. The monks walked at the head of the funeral train to the open tomb in the cloisters. There the coffin was set down, and the old abbot spoke a few touching and impressive words. Then with litany and prayers, Siegfried's mortal remains were laid beside those of his fathers.

The mourners had knelt in silent devotion, and the abbess, choosing the moment when they rose from their knees to execute her plan, said to the unhappy Oda, as if by a sudden inspiration, in a low but audible tone, —

“Countess Oda, we need no longer be silent as to that of which we all know. Thy loss is greater than ours. The rest of us take leave here of a brother and friend, but thou hast bidden farewell to thy beloved one. At this sacred time and place, let the honored dead witness thy solemn vow to consecrate thy soul to his memory, and never to

give thy love to another, now that he hath departed whose heart was thine ! ”

At these designing words, Oda started as from a lurking serpent. Well she understood Jutta's object, and wished that it were now possible to repeat Siegfried's farewell words to her, but everything forbade, and pressing her hand to her heart, she answered, trembling, “ What I have vowed to the dead, God only knoweth, or shall know ! ”

But this did not satisfy the abbess, who continued, strenuously, “ What is pleasing to God is also pleasing to men. Why should we not know what thou hast vowed, we who would help and console thee ? ”

In Oda's mind there was a struggle as to whether she should speak, or be silent.

Then mildly interposed the venerable abbot, “ What passeth between the sorrowing heart and its Creator is a sacred mystery into which no fellow-creature should pry. The maiden is right. I pray thee, my lady, disturb not the peace of the dead ! ”

The abbess, angered that she had failed in her object, and likewise at the abbot's admonition, replied, loftily, “ It is for the peace of the dead that we urge this vow upon the maiden, as a fitting sacrifice to him who died for her. ”

Jutta had no idea what meaning her words conveyed to Oda. She simply meant that the feud which caused Siegfried's death was the result of Oda's sojourn at Regenstein ; but Oda understood her otherwise. In Oda's ears she plainly asserted that he had courted death in the despair of rejected love. She had striven in her own mind against this interpretation of his last words ; but now that Jutta boldly declared it before so many witnesses, she doubted no longer, and felt that she indeed

owed him, as atonement, the renunciation of her future happiness.

She tottered toward the open tomb, ready to utter the fatal vow, when Reginhild, who well knew that he whom she loved was not dead, but living, hastened to Oda, and throwing her arms about her, cried, "Take no vow, Oda, I abjure thee! I know thy heart, and God knoweth it. Leave thyself in His hands!"

Then she led Oda unresistingly from the cloister, not noticing the look of implacable enmity which Jutta threw upon her in passing.

One, at least, of the by-standers had been appalled when he saw Oda about to take the vow of celibacy, — Bock von Schlanstedt, — for he knew more than Reginhild, but *his* lips were sealed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WEEKS passed before the tribunal could assemble. Finally all the counts and princes of the Hartz country and the adjacent provinces came together and sat in the open air, in a half-circle on both sides of the stone table and the chief judge's seat, under the great linden-tree. On the right hand of the duke sat the abbess, and on the left his brother, the bishop of Halberstadt, who now saw his rival for the first time since the quarrel over Schwanebeck and Emersleben and inwardly rejoiced at his humiliation. Albrecht's brothers were also present, but they were allowed no more voice in the trial than the burgomaster and council, who appeared as complainants. Outside the bar were many nobles and knights, as well as a crowd of the townsfolk.

Duke Otto, of Brunswick, exercised his office of chief judge with justice and impartiality, uninfluenced by his brother's deadly hatred of the accused.

Among the judges were friends and foes of the count, but the nobles among the spectators took his part, regarding him as the embodiment of knightly virtues, and grieving the more for his overthrow, as the burgers everywhere were born foes of the nobility.

Three conflicting views were brought forward. The bishop and his allies would only be satisfied with the count's death. The burgomaster, in the name of the citizens, declared their willingness to spare him on condition that they might hold him a prisoner for life; that the Regenstein castle, within the city boundaries, should be dismantled, and that twelve watch-towers should be built

upon its walls at the count's cost. The abbess and his friends demanded his immediate release, on payment of a suitable ransom; and he declared himself unwilling to accept other conditions.

The case was argued long and earnestly. But as the sun began to decline, and the opponents were no nearer an agreement, the duke determined that a detailed statement of the different opinions, and the grounds therefor, should be engrossed and submitted to the Emperor for his decision.

Then the abbess rose, and said, with a clear voice, "And I offer to go to the Emperor and obtain his judgment. Grant me this favor, noble lords! The count is my protector, and it is my duty and privilege to plead for him; and I pledge myself, upon my princely and womanly honor, to speak the whole truth!"

As she stood erect, beautiful and courageous, looking proudly from one to the other, not one ventured to refuse her petition, although many felt dissatisfied that Count Albrecht should have so powerful and seductive an advocate with the Emperor. The abbess was chosen, however, to represent the assembly at his court. The sitting was declared at an end, and Albrecht von Regenstein, strongly guarded, was conveyed back to prison.

This was not the same in which he had been confined at first. A cell had been built for him under the roof of the Town House, of solid timber, fastened together with heavy iron bands, eight feet square and somewhat over six feet high. It had a barred loop-hole and iron-bound door, and within it were a bench and iron chain. Here, therefore, lay Count Albrecht, the bravest knight of the Hartz, fettered and helpless, a caged lion.

When he set forth on his dismal way to the trial, he thought of the day when he rode by the linden with Siegfried,

and as his faithful horse shied, observed to his brother, "God forbid that a Regenstein shall ever stand as the accused under this linden!" It was on the same day that he had gone to the Town House, confronted the assembled council, and striking the table with his mailed hand, had peremptorily ordered the abrogation of the bishop's court.

And now — now he himself had stood beneath the linden, threatened with death or life imprisonment, in the power of that same council which he had seen tremble before him. Accustomed to breathe the free mountain air and live in the saddle, he was now confined in a dark cage wherein he could hardly take four steps, and where he heard nothing but the rattling of his chains as he moved. His jailer answered no questions, no one approached his cell, and during the trial none ventured to address him; he had nothing to console him in his terrible loneliness.

Though he clung to life and the hope of freedom, yet his home at Regenstein had become desolate. Siegfried was dead. Oda gone. The former had fallen, it was true, fighting bravely, and a better death Albrecht could not wish for himself. But it was Siegfried's last words which horrified Albrecht, "Now am I no longer in thy way!"

If, perchance, he knew of Albrecht's love for Oda, and had died thinking that his brother had sent him into the pass to get him out of his way! Albrecht felt that if it were thus, nothing could ever make him happy again. The order which he had given Siegfried seemed to him a reasonable one. Victory or defeat depended equally upon each of the brothers; each had staked his life upon the game, and must go on staking it continually. If fate had so decreed, he might have survived the day as did Bock, who, nevertheless, did not spare himself, or as some of his men did, who fought in the fatal defile. At the same

time, he should not have risked Siegfried's life, for Oda's sake, as well as Siegfried's.

His ardent love for the former was now his sole possession ; it shortened the dreary hours, and lighted up his dark cell like a ray of sunlight. Oh, that he could comfort her ! That he could only fly with her ! He would ask nothing but to be near her, to talk with her as he used on the lofty stone seat at Regenstein. He would not venture to hope for her love even were he free, but he would joyfully consecrate his life to her service if he might be allowed to do so. But should she turn from him with aversion, for Siegfried's sake, life would then be worthless.

At times, Jutta's stately figure would appear before him, but the vision inspired no other feeling than that of gratitude. She had struggled for him nobly under the linden, notwithstanding the bishop's fierce looks and the wondering glances of his associates, and plainly showed her devotion. She must still hope to save him, and with sorrow he thought of it, still hope that he would be hers. He had longed to call out to her, " Spare thy words ; though thou savest me, thou lovest me."

Well he knew that no armor was proof against Jutta's charms, and that by such Ludwig, the Bavarian, was only too readily moved ; but could Albrecht accept his freedom from her hands, and then requite her with barren thanks ?

While he brooded thus, the abbess was already far on her journey, her first goal being the castle of the Wartburg. There she would beg of her former protectress, the Landgravine Mathilde, of Thuringia, a letter to her father, the Emperor, which would insure a gracious reception from him. She hoped much from the chivalrous Emperor, who had so lately shown his magnanimity to his own prisoner, the friend of his youth, King Friedrich the Fair, of Austria, whom the fortunes of war had delivered

into his hands. Ludwig had released him from imprisonment, received him with open arms, and made him co-ruler with himself. It was through this generosity that Jutta trusted to obtain favorable sentence for the captive.

At the Wartburg, where she was cordially welcomed, she learnt that the Emperor with his court was at Landsbut, in Bavaria, and journeyed thither with a letter from Mathilde, after enjoying her hospitality. Jutta's suite consisted of Mistress Hedwig von Hakeborn, Gerhard von Ditzfurt, a younger noble attached to the castle, her waiting-woman, and six mounted servitors, — men who led the numerous pack-horses.

The Countess Adelheid had besought the abbess that she might go with her; but as the latter, during her absence, must leave the convent under the care of the superior, Kunigunde, she wished Adelheid to play the spy, and sanctioned her resistance to the exercise of any undue authority on Kunigunde's part. As Jutta must take one member of the chapter as maid of honor, she designedly chose the pretty, merry, and not too scrupulous Hedwig, who was perfectly ready to turn the heads of the knights at Ludwig's court, and to help the abbess in the removal of any obstacles.

Oda's life was rendered very uncomfortable by reason of Jutta's jealousy, which led to a continued unremitting supervision. But after her departure, the superior, who favored every one whom Jutta disliked, and was now nominally supreme, treated her with marked kindness. The other inmates of the castle, including Adelheid, were all friendly, and showed great sympathy for the loss of her betrothed, as they considered Siegfried to have been.

The conviction that he had sought death for her sake weighed heavily upon Oda, and she asked herself if she had been guilty, in exciting hopes which she had surely

destroyed. But her deepest grief was not for the dead but for the living brother, the uncertainty of whose fate caused her the keenest anxiety. She did not dare to find relief by confiding in any of her convent companions; and Eilika, notwithstanding her devotion, was, after all, but a servant, and too talkative to be trusted with a secret; yet the sharp-eyed maid had divined it already, and just as she formerly did all in her power to promote Oda's union with Siegfried, so now she was equally determined to see her wedded to Count Albrecht, expecting confidently his speedy release, and she tried to impart something of her hopefulness to her mistress. Her firm ally in this new scheme was still her devoted knight.

Bock von Schlanstedt had established himself at St. Wiperti's to be near his imprisoned master, and meantime kept up constant communication with Eilika. The latter was nothing loath, for Florencius seemed to her, on nearer acquaintance, to be not so congenial.

Bock, on the other hand, had become friendly with him, having a special object in cultivating his acquaintance, apart from any personal liking. The jovial scrivener was a favorite in the city, where he had good friends among the burghers; and Bock hoped through some of them to gain access to his master, whom he longed to speak with, and Florencius had promised to do all in his power to further the knight's desire.

When Eilika informed Bock of the discovery she had made of her mistress's love for Count Albrecht, she told him what he already knew better than she, but he was glad to have this confirmation of Siegfried's last words.

Eilika rejoiced her mistress by relating to her how Bock hoped, through the mediation of the scrivener, to be able to speak to his master, and Oda was glad at the prospect of thus hearing news of the count, and of his possible

release. She gave her maid a jewelled trinket, that Florencius might have the means to bribe his guard, but it was necessary to use the greatest care. Florencius needed time to prepare the way, and when at last he had worked successfully upon the guards and the turnkey, Jutta unexpectedly returned from her journey to the Emperor's court.

She had conquered, and the result of her courageous pilgrimage was the count's deliverance.

After many negotiations, representations, and prayers, she had wrung from the Emperor the freedom of the count, provided he complied with the conditions named in his Majesty's letter to the city of Quedlinburg.

The conditions were these: Count Albrecht was to remain protector of the convent, but he must resign his jurisdiction over Quedlinburg, which was for the future to be independent. The Regenstein fortresses within its boundaries were to be given up to the city. Gunteckenburg was not to be rebuilt, nor any new fortress within a mile of the city; and finally, seven towers must be erected on its walls, at Count Albrecht's cost.

In the case of his submission to these conditions, he should be set at liberty forthwith, and the Emperor granted the town, as a special favor, the power of trying its own criminals, but such right should in no way interfere with the tribunal under the linden-tree.

The city agreed to free the count on these conditions, which Count Albrecht, however, refused.

The abbess was inexpressibly chagrined. For his sake she had undertaken a long and difficult journey, in bad weather, had worked and striven for him, and finally obtained conditions which did not imply the surrender of any part of his earldom, and which, in comparison with the loss of life or liberty, were light indeed. And had

she done all this in vain? She had expected such gratitude from him as might fill the measure of her dearest hopes, and instead of this, his answer was no more than a surly refusal.

She sat down and wrote to him, upbraiding him with his ingratitude, and exhorting him urgently to alter his decision.

The letter was delivered to him by permission of the council, whose wishes coincided with Jutta's, as this treaty would give the city many long-desired advantages in place of the doubtful satisfaction of keeping Count Albrecht von Regenstein, as long as he lived, within their walls.

But Jutta's letter could not bend the count's stubborn will. He sent word to the writer that he felt the deepest gratitude for her exertions on his behalf, but at the same time he was firmly resolved to make no concessions, and preferred rather to remain a prisoner.

The abbess was in despair, and was completely at a loss as to what should be done next. She meditated the strangest plans, and was prepared to resort to any extreme measure which might help her in the attainment of her object.

At last the time approached for Bock's secret visit to his master. He desired to bring Count Albrecht a greeting from Oda, and begged, through Eilika, to be allowed to see her alone, to which she gladly assented. They met in the crypt of the castle church, where the ladies of the convent sometimes retired for silent devotions, before the tomb of the first abbess, Mathilde.

"Salute the count for me," said Oda, "and say to him that I heartily beseech him to accept the Emperor's conditions, and therewith purchase his freedom."

"And hast thou nothing more to tell him, my lady?" asked Bock.

"Nay," answered she; "that is enough."

"Wilt thou not send him a token of remembrance to console him in his imprisonment?" he urged.

"What shall I send him? I have nothing here; or—stay! This ring, it belonged to my dear mother; take this to Count Albrecht."

She pulled off a small gold ring from her finger, and gave it to the gratified Bock.

He promised to return the next evening, and went upon his errand, accompanied by Florencius.

The latter had arranged everything with the greatest care. He brought his companion successfully into the city, concealed him till nightfall with a trusty acquaintance, and then led him, with the help of the guards whom he had bribed, through a postern into the Town House, and thence to the count's cell, where he was left alone, the scrivener retiring with the guards.

Bock placed himself outside of the barred opening, where he could easily talk with his master.

Count Albrecht, filled with joyful surprise at the sound of his vassal's voice, received Oda's message and ring with deep emotion. "She is not angry; she doth not turn from me with aversion," he thought, and pressed the little token more than once to his lips.

"Dear maiden," said he; "she wisheth me to purchase life and freedom, but she counteth not the cost. The humiliation is too great, the reward too small."

"Sir Count," replied Bock, "I crave thy pardon, but that is a foolish speech. One defeat after so many victories, what doth it signify? It is not only Countess Oda, we all pray thee to yield. Come, courage! Lead us again into the field, and we will follow thee anywhere, and be quits with these miserable burghers!"

"Nay, Bock; Fate hath crossed my path, and I have surrendered my sword."

"We will forge thee a new one, Sir Count!" exclaimed the knight. "What is to become of thine earldom, and thy noble house? Regenstein waiteth for its lord."

"It is lonely and desolate," answered the count. "Upon its rocks the flowers have faded."

"Who knoweth, Sir Count?" cried Bock; "mayhap I bring thee happiness which will make life worth living again."

Count Albrecht said nothing, answering only with a heavy sigh, and Bock continued, "Sir Count, I have a message to thee from Count Siegfried."

"From Siegfried! Siegfried died in my arms; how canst thou bring me a message from him?"

"He gave it to me, to give to thee when he should be dead, at the time he lay in the pass after his fatal wound," replied Bock. "I saw thee no more that day, and could not deliver it until now."

"Ah, Bock," Albrecht said, sorrowfully, "I know only too well what it is. He hath told thee I sent him to his death."

"Nay, nay, my lord! Those were not his words at all. I was to say to thee that Countess Oda confided to him that she did not love him, but thee!"

Here a chain clanked as if the count made a sudden movement, and he cried, "Bock! Bock! What sayest thou? Knowest thou what thou sayest?"

"Word for word," protested the other. "I promised our Siegfried, when he lay dying, to say this to thee from him, and to no one else."

"Bock! good Bock! Bethink thyself well what thou art saying to me, and that my life hangeth upon thy words."

"Upon my honor, Sir Count, I have told thee the exact words Count Siegfried spoke before his death."

"Truly, Bock? My God! She loveth me! She loveth me!" whispered Count Albrecht, in great agitation. "And I lie here in disgrace, fettered like a hound! Open the door! Let me out, Bock," he cried, suddenly. "Help me! Hast thou no iron? Strike, Bock! I must break loose!" Almost beside himself, he struck the walls of his cell so that the solid planks groaned and creaked.

The turnkey rushed in, alarmed. "Hold thy peace, Sir Count, I beseech thee! Thou wilt waken all the folk in the city; they can hear thee in the market-place!"

"Let them hear me!" roared the count. "Let them come with their accursed conditions! I will do all they desire, subscribe to everything, promise anything, swear anything, only I *will* be free!"

"To-morrow thou canst be free, if thou choosest!" cried Bock through the barred loop-hole.

"Thinkest thou that they will hold to their word, and release me? Get me my freedom, Bock, and bring me to her. I want naught else but freedom, a horse and sword, and her, her, Bock!

"To-morrow, Sir Count; to-morrow!" said Bock, reassuringly.

"When wilt thou see Countess Oda?" Count Albrecht inquired, a little more calmly.

"To-morrow evening, in the crypt."

"Say to her, Bock, that I accept the Emperor's conditions, because she wisheth, solely because she wisheth. That is all, and she must be silent and so must thou, Bock. So soon as I am at liberty, I must see her, but alone, quite alone. Canst thou contrive that?"

"Surely, Count Albrecht!" replied Bock; "in the crypt. I will see to it, and Florencius will help us. Only come to the convent so soon as thou art free, and leave the rest to us."

“Good ; to-morrow morning I will send to the council.”

“Sir Count, Florencius will see Countess Oda early in the morning. Shall he not take thy message to her? He is trustworthy and discreet, and hath brought me here. Without him, I could not have come.”

“Yea, Bock! Let Florencius tell her. Is he at hand?”

Bock went and called the scrivener. “Thanks, brave friend!” said Count Albrecht. “Bock will give thee a message to Countess Oda. I beg thee to deliver it.”

“Thou mayest depend upon me, Count Albrecht,” answered Florencius. “And now we must go, before the watch is changed.”

“Go! go! We will soon meet again!” exclaimed the count, and putting his hand through the bars it was heartily grasped. Then the two cautiously departed, leaving a happy man in the gloomy cell.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

As the inmates of the convent gathered for the morning meal, Oda was missing, and it being her function as last-comer to say grace, a messenger was despatched to learn the cause of her absence. On his return, he informed the abbess that she would join the others directly, adding that Master Florencius was with her.

"Florencius?" said the abbess, in astonishment.

"At this hour?" cried the superior.

"And alone?" added the deaconess.

"Nay; her maiden Eilika is with her," the messenger replied.

Shortly afterward Oda appeared, excused herself for the delay, took her place at the table, and repeated the grace. But it was done so hastily and so absent-mindedly that she drew upon herself looks of surprise and displeasure.

During the meal, which the ladies, having unlimited leisure, willingly prolonged, Oda seemed altogether unlike herself. Now she sat dreamily gazing into the distance, and again would become so animated that every one at the table noticed the change which had come over her, and felt sure that something extraordinary had occurred. Could it be that the jovial Florencius had temporarily made her forget the death of Count Siegfried? But what had happened that her cheerfulness should be manifested so suddenly and openly?

The abbess thoughtfully observed Oda's altered manner, and bade her friend Adelheid, Hedwig von Hakeborn, and

a personal attendant of her own to watch Oda narrowly, and report her movements.

No one suspected the true cause of the Countess von Falkenstein's joy, for none but the four who were initiated knew of the resolutions which Count Albrecht had taken during the night.

He had sent in the morning to the burgomaster, to beg for a conference.

The burgomaster came, and Count Albrecht declared to him his willingness to purchase his freedom by accepting the Emperor's conditions, if he could be solemnly assured that he would be released from durance that same evening, and his liberation kept secret until the next day.

Master Nikolaus von Bekheim, believing he could promise the prisoner that his wishes would be acceded to, immediately called the council together in private session, and meanwhile prepared a deed of quitclaim for the count to sign.

The council met, the count being brought into their presence, and the discussion was temperate and dignified.

As by this act of the count a great revenue would come to the council, they treated their late foe with marked consideration. He himself spoke not a word more than was absolutely necessary. The burgomaster read aloud the deed of quitclaim, the count signed it with a firm hand, and swore, before God, to honorably and scrupulously observe the contract. Thereupon he was declared free, and assured that his release should be kept secret until the following day.

He remained in the burgomaster's apartment till the twilight fell, and then left the city of which he had been so long the feudal lord.

Clad in his coat of mail and steel helmet, and covered with a long mantle, he strode through the darkness up the

well-known way to the Wiperti cloister. It was the end of October, but the fresh wind and cold, drizzling rain were delightful to the released prisoner, who halted repeatedly, and expanding his chest, took many a long breath.

The sacrifice he had made to regain his freedom did not weigh very heavily upon his mind, but the thought of the independence of the city rankled within him, and his blood boiled for the moment as he passed the demolished Gunteckenburg. Happily he had not sworn to abstain from vengeance, and some day he would make Quedlinburg pay the reckoning, with interest.

However, for the present he had troubles which lay nearer his heart. It was owing principally to Jutta's efforts that he owed his release, and he well knew what reward she expected. He was deeply and sincerely pained that he must disappoint her hopes, and had it not been for Oda's desire and Oda's love, he would never have signed that compact with the council.

So his liberation was due to the two women who dwelt yonder under the same roof, both of whom loved him, and of whom one expected a high price in exchange for his freedom, while the other, in her unselfishness, never imagined for a moment what happiness his release was bringing her. And now he was on his way to them, to fill one heart with joy and the other with bitterness.

In front of the Wiperti cloister stood Bock, in the darkness and rain, awaiting his lord, but before he could see the count he recognized his footsteps, and hastened to meet him.

"I am here, Bock!" cried Albrecht, pressing his loyal knight's hand; "now lead me to the countess."

"Refresh thyself, first, with a brief rest, and a morsel of food, Sir Count," answered Bock. "Above in the

castle they are now supping, and the gracious countess will not be able to absent herself."

The count was obliged to submit, and after partaking of refreshment with the prior, he and Bock mounted the heights, upon which stood the castle. He passed through the court-yard and Jutta's newly built portal, and entered the crypt, where a lamp perpetually burned before the tomb of the first abbess. Here he waited for his beloved, in the vast, dimly lighted vault, his eyes fixed upon the door. Bock had gone into the castle to inform Florencius and Eilika of his arrival.

Oda soon appeared with the former, who quickly retired, closing the door behind him; Bock and Eilika keeping watch before the portal meanwhile.

Count Albrecht approached the trembling maiden and clasped her in his arms, while she hid her head upon his breast, and wept.

"Oda, Oda!" he whispered, softly; "art thou now mine?"

At the sound of his voice she started in affright, and tried to release herself. But he held her, and said, "Knowest thou not, Oda, that I have long loved thee with my whole soul? That it is only for thy sake that I have left my prison?"

She looked at him like one aroused from a deep slumber, who cannot tell where she is. Albrecht love her! Had long loved her! Surely, she was dreaming. She smiled, but her blue eyes seemed to say, "Ah, wake me not yet! It is so sweet to dream." When, however, his glance met hers, and she felt herself pressed closely in his arms, she gradually became conscious of the reality of her happiness. Her breast heaved, her thoughts were still in confusion. At last she threw her arms about Albrecht's neck, and it seemed as if her heart must break for joy.

"Oda, didst thou know that I loved thee?" he asked.

"Nay; but I prayed for it as for my soul's salvation."

"And lovest thou me? Lovest thou me truly?" he asked again, that he might hear her repeat what he would gladly listen to forever.

"Ah, beyond everything!" she cried. "Since I first saw thee, Albrecht, thou hast been my pole-star, my soul's shrine!"

"Then nothing shall ever separate us again," he said; "we are united for eternity."

She shuddered, and answered, in a low tone, "Siegfried standeth between us. He sought his death on my account."

Albrecht started. "Who said so, Oda?"

"I knew it when he bade me farewell," she replied, sadly. "He said, 'I have now only one wish, — to make Albrecht happy. This is a farewell forever.' Those were his own very words," Oda asserted.

"Siegfried died in my arms; and his last words were, 'I am no longer in thy way.'" This utterance came meditatively from Albrecht's lips.

"He is yet in our way, Albrecht. Ought we to enjoy a happiness for which Siegfried gave his life?"

Albrecht mused mournfully. As he now held his beloved in his arms, so had he held his dying brother. Yet, had not Siegfried sacrificed himself, that he and Oda might be happy; had Siegfried not himself sent the message, telling him of Oda's love?

"Oda!" he said, at last, "I will confess now that it was from Siegfried himself that I learnt of thy love."

She looked at him, shocked.

"He spoke not of it to *me*," continued Albrecht, "but as he lay dying, he intrusted Bock with a message, which the knight gave me only yesterday. Thy love is a legacy

to me from the dead. Over Siegfried's grave will we join hands, and his spirit shall give us a benediction."

"But, Albrecht, what if it should be a curse?"

"We need not fear my dear brother's spirit, Oda, for we are not guilty of his death. He wished us to be happy."

"So let it be, then, in God's name, my beloved," she answered, and pressed upon his lips her first kiss.

After the evening meal, the abbess sat alone in her room. Upon the table before her lay an open book, and resting her head on her hand, she idly turned over the illuminated pages.

Knocking hastily, her waiting-woman entered. "Gracious lady, the Countess Oda has just gone into the crypt with Master Florencius."

The abbess looked up as though roused from a dream.

"What sayest thou? Countess Oda with Master Florencius in the crypt? Art thou not mistaken?"

"Nay, my lady; I saw them both pass through the portal, with my own eyes."

The abbess arose. "Go," she added, after a short pause, "and summon the ladies of the chapter. Request them to come to me immediately; let each bring a long taper. Thou needst say nothing further."

The waiting-woman hastened away to do her errand.

"Now, we will unmask the hypocrite!" exclaimed the abbess, when she was alone. "Thou wouldst become Countess von Regenstein, and makest secret appointments with a convent scrivener. This is the cause of thy gayety to-day. Oh! if Count Albrecht knew how his lily was lowering herself!" and she maliciously dwelt upon the manner in which she would brand Oda before the eyes of her convent companions.

The latter were accustomed to the abbess's caprices, and

appeared soon in her room, each bearing a taper, not a little curious at this unusual summons.

"Dear sisters," began the abbess, "we vowed, when journeying far from home, that if we returned in safety, we would offer our silent thanksgivings before the tomb of the blessed Mathilde. Come ye now, and help me fulfil the vow."

"Countess Oda is not here," said Hedwig. "Shall I call her?"

"Nay," replied Jutta, quickly; "we will go without her."

Many of the ladies, who knew how the abbess disliked Oda, now felt sure that something was wrong, but it was only Countess Adelheid who said, softly, —

"What design hast thou, Jutta?"

"Be still, Adelheid!" the abbess whispered.

The tapers were lighted, and the ladies ranged themselves in procession, the abbess at their head. They were not obliged to go by the way of the court-yard, but could pass directly from the castle into the church, through the nave of which they slowly wended, in silence, toward the crypt.

As the abbess softly opened the door, she saw with malignant satisfaction two figures in the obscurity; but as Oda stood between herself and Count Albrecht, Jutta yet expected to surprise her in the arms of Florencius, and hastened forward to seize her prey.

Startled by the sound, Oda turned, and before the abbess's bewildered gaze stood Count Albrecht, free and erect.

His armor gleamed in the candle-light, and his eyes sternly met Jutta's; with one arm he held Oda, who made a movement to flee, and then crept nearer to him.

The abbess was speechless, and stood with wide-open

eyes, as if turned to stone. Her ladies pressed after her, and surrounded her in a half-circle, while the candles shook in their trembling fingers. Not a word was said; the silence was oppressive.

At length, Count Albrecht spoke in a deep, earnest voice, "Thou hast forestalled me, my lady! Not thus did I intend thee to learn of my freedom. My next step would have been to bring thee my heartiest thanks, but I needs must first see her who now standeth beside me as my betrothed!"

The abbess slowly shook her head. Then she said hoarsely, "And thou hast sought and found her here secretly, in the darkness of the crypt. Sir Count, I wish thee joy — of thy bride! Wilt thou take her away with thee?"

"To-morrow morning," he replied, "when I hope —"

"Spare thy words! I will hear no more," she broke in; and said to her ladies, "Come with me! We will choose another time for thanksgiving." Then she turned, and followed by her companions, passed out the same way she had come.

"Albrecht, there goeth our relentless enemy," whispered Oda, as the door closed upon the last candle-bearer, and the crypt was left in the dim light of its ever-burning lamp.

"Hast thou a bolt on thy chamber door?" asked Albrecht.

"Yea," answered she.

"Fa ten it, before thou sleepest," said the count, "and eat nothing in the castle but that thou receivest from Eilika. Hold thyself in readiness to-morrow morning; I will come early to fetch thee."

"Whither, Albrecht?" asked Oda, softly.

"Whither, my love?" he repeated, with a smile. "To

Regenstein, to our castle ! In two days thou shalt be my wife ; the good abbot of Michaelstein shall unite us ! ”

Oda laid her head upon her lover's breast, while he kissed her, and said, “ Sleep sweetly, Oda. This shall be our last parting.” Then, going to the door, he called Florencius, Bock, and Eilika “ Countess Oda von Falkenstein is my betrothed,” he announced to the three. “ To-morrow we will ride home, Bock ! Send the tidings to my brothers. In two days the wedding is to take place at Regenstein.”

Bock kneeled before his young mistress, Eilika gladly kissed her hand, and Florencius wished her and Count Albrecht all happiness.

Oda then betook herself to the castle with Eilika and the scrivener, the Count and Bock returned to the Wiperti monastery.

In the privacy of her chamber, Oda, with a trembling voice, said to her maid, “ Tell me, Eilika, is it a dream, or truth ? Am I really betrothed ? ”

“ Dear mistress,” laughed Eilika, “ the day after to-morrow thou shalt be Countess von Regenstein.”

And Oda, in the fulness of her heart, fell upon her faithful maid's neck, and tears filled her eyes.

The abbess's condition was terrible. On her return from the crypt, where Count Albrecht, with two words, had slain her hopes, like a judge pronouncing the death sentence, she bore herself proudly erect, but once alone, she broke down utterly, but with a great effort finally recovered comparative self-command. She neither spoke nor wept, but walked continually up and down her room till she sank exhausted upon a settle, and lay there, staring at vacancy, till late into the night, when her maid, after much persuasion, got her to bed. Her soul was full of hatred for Albrecht and Oda, and she was conscious of no other feeling than a boundless desire for revenge.

The next morning, after bidding farewell to the other occupants of the castle, Oda entered the abbess's presence, to take leave of her before departing. It was a heavy task.

Jutta received her without rising, and said, "So thou art going back to Regenstein, of which thou seemest so fond, that thou art determined to return thither, if not with one brother, then with another."

"I could have returned with no other than Count Albrecht," she replied.

"So! Wert thou not betrothed to Count Siegfried?"

"Never, my lady!" answered Oda. "It is not true!"

"But he is dead, and cannot gainsay thee."

"My lady, I speak the truth!"

"Count Albrecht told me he wished thee to wed Siegfried. When I was at Regenstein myself, and saw thee with Siegfried, were ye not betrothed?"

"Nay, my lady," Oda said. "Count Albrecht wished it, so long as his brother lived; and, indeed, he himself solicited my hand for Siegfried, but I could not bring myself —"

"Because thou lovedst Count Albrecht?"

"Yea," said Oda, blushing.

"Lovest thou him still?" asked Jutta, quickly.

"Would I follow him otherwise, my lady?"

"And thou wouldst take the hand stained with a brother's blood?"

"What sayest thou!" cried Oda.

"I say," declared the abbess, "he sent his brother to his death, that he might have thee himself."

"Countess Jutta, what hath Albrecht done to thee, that thou shouldst —"

She could say no more, overcome with shame and indignation,

"Concern not thyself with that!" said the abbess, rising. "He hath caused the death of the only man who loved thee."

"That is a shameless falsehood!" exclaimed Oda, beside herself.

A harsh laugh was the only reply.

Footsteps were now heard, and Count Albrecht entered the room directly behind the servant who announced him.

Oda flew toward him. "Albrecht, she saith thou hast as good as slain thy brother," she cried, with a burst of tears.

The count stood between the two, and scanning the abbess with a searching glance, he said, quickly, "Who told thee this, my lady?"

"Thy brother, Bernhard," she answered, boldly.

"Bernhard never said so," interposed Oda. "I was present when he told us of poor Siegfried's death."

But her words fell like a blow upon Count Albrecht.

"I will ask Bernhard if he hath spoken or thought any such thing," he said, gravely; "but now I ask thee, my lady,—and I pray thee weigh thy answer well,—dost *thou* believe this?"

"Yea!"

Albrecht made a hasty movement toward her, but Oda softly held him.

"Then I have naught further to say. I cannot bring myself to utter the thanks which are due thee." And turning away, as if with abhorrence, he said, "Come, Oda! let us leave this abode of evil spirits." And leading her by the hand, straightway he strode from the room.

Bock, who always knew what to do, had provided a horse for his master at dawn, brought his own beast out of the monastery, and ridden with Count Albrecht to the

convent, where, in the court-yard, Oda's and Eilika's horses now stood saddled and ready.

When Albrecht heard that Oda was with the abbess, he boded no good from the interview, and had therefore hastened to her aid. On returning with his love to the court-yard, the four mounted, turned their backs upon the castle, and rode through the cool, misty valley, on the way to Regenstein.

Albrecht and Oda, agitated by the painful scene through which they had just passed, rode in front, Bock and Eilika at a little distance behind.

"Seest thou, dear Mistress Eilika," the knight began, "now we journey together over the same way that we travelled half a year ago; but how changed is everything!"

She nodded and said, "To-day, in sooth, we follow thee more willingly than then, when thou didst capture us here, with no consent of ours."

"Many a good stroke of work have I done in my time," he went on, complacently; "but methinks this is the best prize that I ever bore to Regenstein. I fear such another will not fall to my lot for many a day!"

"We will surely hope not," laughed Eilika.

"Behold how wonderfully all is ordered!" said Bock. "When I took ye prisoners, I only hoped that we might gain a fair ransom; and now one is to become mistress of Regenstein, and thou—thou also hast now no need to become a nun."

"Thinkest thou so?" she asked.

"I have proved my heart and thine, mistress," answered Bock; "and so soon as I can arrange certain things, I will address a petition to the count; and if his answer be favorable, so I hope it will, I will come to thee some day and ask thee to be my wife."

“ Ah ! Sir Knight ! ” said Eilika, full of satisfaction, yet affecting to be much abashed.

“ Do not answer me now,” said he. “ I will leave thee time for reflection, and if thou canst not make up thy mind to take me, it will not yet be too late to go into the cloister.”

Eilika discreetly kept silence, and the knight pursued the matter no further, but changed the conversation forthwith, and they rode on, side by side.

The same hour a messenger from the castle of Quedlinburg was bearing a sealed letter to the bishop of Halberstadt, containing only these words, written in a trembling hand : —

“ Call him to a reckoning, and revenge me.

JUTTA.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

It was on a lowering day of autumn that the Regenstein family sat together at the marriage feast in their lofty castle. Canon Ulrich had not been able to come upon so short a notice, but Bernhard and Reginhild, Poppo, and Günther were here, and the venerable abbot of Michaelstein, who had shared in so many joys and sorrows of the house of Regenstein, had blessed the nuptials of the bridal pair, and sat at Oda's right hand, Bock von Schlanstedt being opposite him.

From time to time, Oda would shyly turn to Albrecht with a look of thankfulness, for, in her humility, she regarded his love as a wonderful and undeserved blessing. The others partook of the happiness of both, and Reginhild already felt a hearty friendship for the new sister, and sought with her usual gayety and wit to enliven the little company, but she hardly succeeded. They all knew the circumstances of Siegfried's death and Albrecht's fatal order, which had led to it. Not one could impute the smallest blame to Albrecht; rather, they compassionated him for the sad memory which he must bear through life. Notwithstanding, when they saw him sitting beside Oda, they thought to themselves that he never would have been there had Siegfried lived. Each sought to banish this thought, while, at the same time, he read it in the faces of the others; and though all strove to be merry, the youngest brother's spirit seemed to sit there with them at the board, and compel recognition.

Soon after the marriage feast, Bernhard rode home with

his wife, though Reginhild gladly would have stayed longer. He had forced himself to appear cheerful, for Albrecht's sake, though far from feeling so. He saw in Oda the cause — though innocent — of all the disputes and fighting of the summer, beginning with the advent of the young countess and leading to the siege of Regenstein, the quarrel with Quedlinburg, Albrecht's defeat and Siegfried's death, and which were not yet at an end. For Bernhard knew, what Albrecht was still ignorant of, that the bishop of Halbertstadt had taken advantage of Albrecht's imprisonment to seize upon the earldom of Falkenstein. A new struggle with the bishop therefore threatened, due also to Oda.

On the day of his return to Regenstein, Albrecht had ridden directly to Bernhard, who received him joyfully. The latter's first words related to Siegfried's death. Bernhard exonerated him from all blame, and he and his wife endeavored to banish any feeling of self-reproach. In their first meeting no suggestion of it intruded itself, though the old hearty confidence was not restored.

Bernhard's remonstrances, due to Albrecht's restless striving after power and his detention of Oda, had had no other result than to produce a coolness between the two brothers. In accordance with Bernhard's orders, their allies had withdrawn from Falkenstein, and abandoned it to the bishop, which the former feared would enrage Albrecht when he should hear of it.

All this, and the quarrel with the fiery abbess, who would be sure to try to revenge herself, weighed heavily upon Bernhard, and this it was which hastened his steps from Regenstein after the wedding.

At his departure, Poppo, Günther, and Bock betook themselves to the soldiers' quarters and joined them there in a carouse, Albrecht and Oda remaining in the great hall

with the abbot. They stood arm in arm before the fireplace, watching its flickering flame.

Then the good old man, approaching them with affectionate regards, began in a mild tone, "Hearken, my children; I have waited till we should be alone, to speak a few words to you both. My hair was already gray when I brought thee, Albrecht, a helpless babe, to the font at thy christening. Thy whole life lies open before me. I know thee better than thou dost know thyself; and thy maidenly spirit, Countess Oda, is no closed book to the octogenarian. But as ye both knelt to-day at Siegfried's tomb, the good God permitted me to look into your hearts as I have never looked before. I saw pain and sorrow therein, as well as anxious fear, lest God should not bless this union, owing to him for whose rest ye prayed. I know ye are both guiltless, and therefore may the Lord release you from doubt and despondency, that in this transitory world ye become not faint-hearted, but lead good and happy lives here, with a joyful hope in a blessed immortality. With this holy sign, I remove to-day and forever what burdeneth your consciences, and pray for the peace of the dead, the consolation of the living, and an everlasting reunion in the world to come. Amen."

So spake the venerable abbot, making the sign of the cross over Albrecht and Oda, who humbly bowed before him. The former reverently pressed the old man's hand to his lips; then, with a glad heart, he fervently kissed his beloved Oda.

On the third day after Jutta had sent her message to the bishop of Halberstadt, he made his appearance at the castle. The announcement of his arrival came to her like a thunder-clap, to draw her from the apathy into which she had fallen.

"Bid him welcome!" she cried to her waiting-woman.

She had taken the first step ; now there was no drawing back.

The bishop entered, but not a feature in his impenetrable face betrayed his hopes.

"May the blessing of heaven be upon thee, noble lady," he ejaculated, piously.

"Thy greeting soundeth as 't were mockery," replied she, bitterly.

"One doth not jest with a bruised or broken heart," he made answer.

"My heart is neither bruised nor broken, but full of indignation and —"

"Determination to be revenged," he interposed. "That I can well believe."

The abbess was silent, and pointed to a chair, while she seated herself.

"We go back to just where we were when thou camest to Halberstadt," the bishop went on, "but with this great difference : then I offered to avenge thy wrongs, and time and opportunity were not wanting to bend the count to thy will. But thou didst reject my proposal, and preferredst to warn and protect him. Verily, thou hast done it to good purpose ! Notwithstanding which, I have overcome and delivered him, bound, into the hands of his enemies."

"Thou?" interrupted Jutta.

"Who else?" inquired the bishop. "Who began the contest with him? Who urged on his foes in Blankenburg and Wernigerode? Who entered into an alliance with the towns against him, and wakened the Count von Falkenstein out of his sleep, and sent the Quedlinburgers a body of horsemen at the right time, — the same who caught him in the morass? Whose counsel led to the tribunal of nobles, and suggested the demand for the count's death?

All this, my lady, have I done ! But it pleased thee to be his guardian angel, to use thy eloquence on his behalf, and to go, for his sake, to the Emperor. Thou hast everywhere crossed my path, and hast saved and freed our enemy ; and what thanks hast thou for it ? ”

A heavy sigh escaped from Jutta.

“ If thou hadst only saved him for thyself ! Why didst not thou insert a clause that he should be free only in case thou becamest mistress of Regenstein ? ”

“ Because I trusted him,” replied the abbess, with inexpressible bitterness.

“ Because thou didst trust him, and not me,” added the bishop. “ I pray thee now, hath he given thee any assurance of his love ? ”

“ None,” she answered.

“ And yet thou hast trusted him,” said the bishop, sardonically.

“ He assured me that he hoped Countess Oda would marry his brother.”

“ But after he had fallen in the fight — ”

“ Fallen, Bishop Albrecht ! Count Albrecht sent him to his death.”

“ Canst thou prove it ? ” asked the bishop.

“ From certain intimations of his brother Bernhard — ”

The bishop shook his head. “ A suspicion ; nothing more ! We cannot avail of this.”

“ Avail of what thou canst, but he must not enjoy his happiness,” cried the abbess.

“ He hath paid dear for it, and it is too late to take it from him. He hath escaped us, through thee, and will not let himself be taken a second time.”

“ Paid dearly ! His power is undiminished ; his protectorate of the city weakened rather than strengthened him. And believest thou that he will remain quiet ? Thinkest

thou he will leave thee in undisturbed possession of Falkenstein? No sooner will the spring come than he will appear likewise. Doth he not know whom he hath to thank for his downfall? Thou hast summed up the injuries thou hast done him; believe me he hath also summed them up! Nor will he forgive thee for advocating the death penalty. He seeth in thee his deadly foe, whom he will relentlessly pursue. Already he hath forced thee to flee from thy episcopal seat, and he would gladly hunt thee down beyond any Emperor's help. Thy life is not save for an hour!"

The bishop, leaning back in his chair, had listened unmoved to this passionate appeal. Now he observed, with a sinister smile, "Thy words are like music to me. I had never dreamed that Countess Jutta von Kranichfeld cared for my poor, worthless life. I thank thee, from my heart, fair lady! But how thinkest thou this danger is to be averted?"

She arose quickly, angered that he chose not to understand her.

"If thou dost not know," she said, coldly, "how should I?" and she began to walk up and down.

The bishop arose also, approached her and said, "Speak out, my lady! What wouldst thou of me?"

She met his glance, but hesitated a moment, then answering, "Nothing!" she moved away from him.

The bishop put his hand into the pocket of his violet robe, drew out a paper, unfolded it and read with emphasis, "Call him to a reckoning, and revenge me!" Then he looked at her pointedly.

"Give it to me!" she cried quickly, stretching out her hand. "Let me burn it! It was a folly. All is changed since the summer."

"In no wise, my lady!" he said, smiling, putting back

the paper into his pocket. "I am wholly at thy service, but I must first hear thy commands."

She threw back her head, saying, "I have no commands for thee! Protect thyself as best thou canst; no harm will come to me."

"Count Albrecht hath something better to do now than to think of injury"; and the bishop added, to exasperate Jutta, "He sitteth now with his young wife, kisseth her fair cheeks, and relateth merry tales to make her laugh—"

"Drive me not frantic!" cried the abbess.

"What wouldst thou have me do, then?" he asked.

"He must not live!" she exclaimed, involuntarily.

"Ah! Dost mean it?" said the bishop. "Thou wishest his death?"

"Hast *thou* not wished it?"

"Yea, through a just sentence; but now in his own castle and in the arms of his wife—"

"Darest thou not do it?" she said, with scorn.

The bishop folded his arms, saying, calmly, "What dost thou bid me do?"

"Call him to account."

"Thou knowest the price; wilt thou agree to it?"

She struggled with herself, while her breast heaved painfully.

"It is thy wish as well as mine," she stammered, trembling.

"Shall I have what I ask?" he went on, resolutely.

"Yea," she gasped, covering her face with her hands, and shuddering.

He came close to her. "Seven years I have loved thee, seven years hath my heart yearned for thee," he whispered. "Now, at last! At last!"

She drew back, exclaiming, "Go! go!"

“ Countess Jutta, when that is done which thou desirest, where shall we meet again? ”

“ At Falkenstein,” she whispered, with difficulty.

“ Good! I will send thee an escort.” And the bishop of Halberstadt left her.

The abbess gazed after him, fixedly. “ When it is done,” she murmured.

CHAPTER XXX.

WINTER approached in all its might, heralding its coming with stormy winds, frost, and sleet, and presently subdued the whole land, holding it enchained in icy fetters. The glittering band of snow which lay on the summit of the Brocken became broader and broader, till it covered the whole mountain, and finally stretched out far and wide over the plain. Only Regenstein, whose steep, rocky walls could not hold the snow, stood out bald and gray, in the midst of the whiteness, as if too proud to wear the tyrant's colors.

Within the castle, however, it was very different. There were shelter, and ease, and comfort.

It was a happy time for Albrecht and Oda. Shut out from the world, with none to intermeddle, they lived for each other in a blissful solitude, which they enjoyed to the full.

When the storm-winds ceased blustering, a peaceful stillness reigned. Within the walls all was quiet; only in the smithy one heard at times the blows of the busy hammer.

Mighty fires burned in the chimneys, and in Albrecht's well-ordered room sat the happy pair, never tired of relating to one another their early experiences. The rough soldier had become a tender husband, eager to perform household service for his young wife, in the performance of which his awkwardness caused them many a hearty laugh. The glance of his eye and the sound of his voice betokened perfect content and an almost childlike gladness; he seemed to think there was naught to do but sit

here in his lofty eyry, watching over and caressing his bride.

As for Oda, she blossomed day by day, in the warm sunshine of love; for the pale lily had become a charming woman, who filled her new place with gentle dignity, never forgetting, in the midst of her love and admiration, that she owed her paradise to the noble man who had placed her where she was. Her only anxiety was lest she should fail to satisfy him; but Albrecht would kiss her brow, draw her to him, and call her every dear name, until her heart was fain to sing for joy, and he could feel its happy pulsations as he embraced her.

Yet, she needed time to comprehend that she was actually mistress here where she had so lately dwelt in mild captivity, driven from her own home, and pining for what seemed then an unattainable blessing. Many a time a sudden horror would possess her, as she forgot for the moment that she was not yet a prisoner, detained here against her guardian's will, and that none had any longer a right to snatch her from her Albrecht's side. How often she recalled her first coming to the castle, and standing in the hall trembling among so many men, with her eyes appealing to Reginhild! And again, her sorrowful departure, when the counts rode against Quedlinburg. At that time she was well-nigh convinced that she should never revisit Regenstein, and yet had she become its mistress, and every one, from its lord down to the humblest scullion, strove to do her honor and service. To celebrate the feast of yule-tide, Albrecht's brothers, Ulrich, Poppo, and Günther, came to Regenstein, Bock von Schlanstedt and the abbot of Michaelstein making part of the company; and nothing interfered with their festivities. When Bernhard saw how happy Oda made his brother, his affection for her grew daily, and the old

intimate relations between the two brothers were again fully restored.

So the eventful year, with its sorrows and its joys, came to an end, and left the house of Regenstein, notwithstanding its losses, powerful and vigorous, and with promise of continued prosperity for many a day.

Albrecht and Oda were soon left alone again, and passed the last hours of the year beside their own fireside, recalling their past joys and griefs, pleasing themselves with pictures of the happiness which the future must have in store for them.

The soldiers and servants of the castle held high revel in their own quarters, Bock von Schlanstedt at their head. The garrison was smaller than usual, for many of those who had followed their lord to the siege of Quedlinburg had never returned, and during the winter no new men were needed. It would be well enough in the early spring to fill up the ranks, when it was time for hostilities to be renewed. The "Wicked Seven" were no longer here, for Gutdüinkel and Fenerlein had fallen in battle, Bock having only four of his chosen comrades left. The appellation "wicked seven" having therefore lost its significance, Bock, in consideration of the five who were left, including himself, ingeniously substituted the name of "the rough hand" for the old one.

The knight was merry, for to-morrow, on New-Year's day, he was to ask his lord's permission to formally woo and wed Eilika. That he might have a clear head for this serious affair, he had separated from the wassailers about midnight, and betook himself to his rocky nook, in the eastern end of the castle.

It was a clear winter's night; the moon had risen, and its light, with the reflection from the snow, made it bright as day. Here and there little fleecy clouds floated over-

head. Bock slowly climbed the rocks, thinking of his well-prepared speech for the morrow. He hoped to be placed by the count, he and his wife, in charge of one of his castles, though there was room enough and to spare at Regenstein for the new couple. Full of these cheerful thoughts, he stood looking idly about, when — merciful Heaven! What sees he! There above upon the height, something is slowly moving; a white figure, plainly visible against the sky, — the templar! The templar appearing thus the first night of the new year! What danger, what calamity to the house doth this not portend?

The rough soldier shuddered and stood rooted to the spot, his eyes fixed upon the apparition. Should he mount the rocks, confront the spectre, and question it boldly? Already his foot was upon the lowest step, when he remembered that he was unarmed, and fearing to meet the spirit without his usual dependence, his sword, he remained motionless, holding his breath as if the slightest sound would send away the ghostly visitant. It remained for a long time upon the topmost height, appearing to look intently upon a certain point in the landscape which seemed to be in the direction of Derenburg. What should be there? Did the phantom behold a misfortune coming thence to menace the Regensteins? At last it glided slowly down the steps, its white mantle blending with the snow, and on a sudden it vanished.

As Bock lay that night in his rocky hermitage, he was tormented with frightful dreams, and it seemed that when he went to his master on the morrow, it would be with a light enough head but a heavy heart. He asked himself whether it were not now his duty to give up his marriage, and devote his time and strength to his master. At any rate, there was no longer any question of another abode than Regenstein; he determined to lose sight neither of

him nor his lady. Should he tell the count of the templar's appearance? It cut him to the heart to overshadow Count Albrecht's happiness with his ominous news, and to awaken within him the apprehension of an unknown danger lurking in the darkness, and ready to fall upon him at any moment. Yet, after much pondering, he saw that he must not conceal his sight of the apparition from the count, who, forewarned, must be the better forearmed. When he presented himself with his petition next morning, Albrecht gave his willing consent, and added, laughingly, "So she hath conquered the old veteran? Wed her, in God's name! Ye have my blessing. Thou shalt choose thy dwelling, even if it should be the Lauenburg!"

"Count Albrecht," said Bock, earnestly, "I shall not leave Regenstein; with thy permission, we will abide here."

"Thou wilt not, then, rule a castle," said the count in surprise. "Why, Bock, I had taken thee to be more ambitious!"

"I cannot leave thee, Sir Count; thou wilt need me!"

"That shall I, in the spring, if we come to blows with the bishop. We must force him to give up Falkenstein, if he will not do it peaceably."

Bock shook his head.

"What aileth thee, Bock?" asked his master, looking at him closely. "Thou dost not look like a glad bridegroom."

"Neither am I," answered Bock. "Count Albrecht, I have ill news for thee; the templar hath shown himself!"

The count started from his seat.

"The templar! When?"

"To-night, above there, on the rocks."

"Who hath seen him?"

"I myself," said Bock. "I saw him as I sought my cell soon after midnight. If I had had my sword, I would have faced him."

"Was thy head clear, Bock?"

"As clear as it is this moment, and the night was as light as day!"

The count was silent, lost in moody thought. Finally, he said, —

"After midnight, thou sayest; it was thus upon the threshold of the old and the new year! Doth the vision point to past or future ills?"

Bock shrugged his shoulders.

"It is said he is only heard or seen when evil is coming. We heard him on that last evening before the siege of Quedlinburg, and who knoweth that he did not appear to forebode Count Siegfried's end?"

"Thou thinkest, Bock, that the templar heralds my death?"

"It may not be thine, Sir Count."

"Whose, then, Bock? Not my beloved wife's!" cried the count.

"Thou hast other brothers," answered Bock. "We are all in the Lord's hand, but I dared not keep this thing from thee."

"Thou art right, old friend; we must be upon our guard. Tell no one what thou hast seen, — not even Eilika. Dost thou hear?"

"No one shall know it, Sir Count," answered Bock, putting his hand in his master's.

"Do not betray by any word or sign that we have aught to fear," the count went on; "act as if nothing had chanced; fit up thy dwelling here as suits thee, and tell me when thou and Eilika will come together at the altar."

Bock nodded, and left the count's presence. But he was no longer in the humor to go and in set phrase declare himself Eilika's lover. He could not rest, and wandered about, now here, now there, without well knowing what he

was about. More than once he met Eilika, who seemed to-day to cross his path continually, and who cast upon him many meaning glances. She had expected his offer long ago, and felt sure of it on New-Year's day, and now, as he showed no disposition to speak, she became more and more gloomy. Bock, being invited to sit at his master's table, found him, to his wonder and joy, cheerful and almost gay, jesting in his usual manner, as if the news of the templar's appearance had faded out of his mind.

"How goeth it, Bock?" he asked, jovially. "Hast stormed the fortress yet? Is the drawbridge lowered?"

"I have not attempted it as yet, my lord," answered Bock, confusedly.

"Wherefore delayest thou, thou bashful youngster?" laughed the count. "It is not our wont here to hold back in fear, without laying hands upon good booty, whatever it is."

"I wish thee courage, knight," said Oda, with a smile; "and if I am not deceived, thou wilt not encounter a fierce resistance."

"If thou needest aid, Bock, thou hast but to speak," added the count. "I am always on the weaker side."

When the meal was ended, the count and his lady left the hall, while Bock remained, sunk in thought.

After a time Eilika entered, saying, "Knight, the countess sendeth thee this cup of wine, and saith thou needest it specially to-day; she bade me sit with thee whilst thou drinkest."

Then, at last, did the war-worn veteran rise to the occasion. He carefully smoothed the wrinkles of his cinnamon-colored doublet, stroked his mustache, and ponderously began: "Thou amiable maiden! Fair flower on the thorny pathway of life! Star shining in my lonely sky. The moment hath come to approach thee, courageously.

I have made no secret of my ardent love, sweet mistress, nor of my fervent desire to call thee my own. I therefore bow the knee, as is befitting before the lady of my heart, and pray thee, most worthy and excellent damsel, to become a knight's honorable wife ; to love me as I love thee, and so to plight me thy troth."

Thereupon he knelt before her, stretched out his bony hand, and, with his head on one side, looked at her with his keen eye and an expression which he was fain to make as languishing and fascinating as possible. His high-flown phrases apparently met with approval, and when he brought them to an end, Eilika took his hand, and, with downcast eyes, as she thought becoming, answered, "I feel greatly honored, Knight, by thy offer, and my heart can no longer conceal its preference for thee. I will be thine in love and service, body and soul, and honor, and obey thee as my lord and master, with truth and constancy, till my life's end."

"Now, I thank thee, beloved maiden," he said, with renewed spirit. "May the holy saints grant thou never regrettest this day. Give me now, I beg, a kiss as the seal of our betrothal."

Then she kissed him, nothing loath, and he rose from his knees and embraced her, joyfully.

"Thou art mine at last, Eilika ! Art thou right happy ?"

"Yea, my — but what shall I call thee, my own ?"

"What shalt thou call me ?"

"I would say, what is thy baptismal name ?"

He looked alarmed, and put his hand to his forehead. "The devil take me !" he cried ; "I have clean forgotten ! I have not heard it for thirty years, and no man here knoweth it !"

"What sha'll we do, then ?" laughed Eilika. "I cannot call thee Bock ; I must have thee christened again."

“Nay, nay; wait a moment!” said he, searching his memory. “I have somewhere an old breviary that my mother sent me, — heaven rest her soul, — when she heard that the Count von Regenstein had taken me into his service. She got a monk to write therein my name and a pious sentence. Come, sweetheart, come with me to my cell; we will seek for it; but—” Here he stopped suddenly, and looked at Eilika, “I cannot read.”

“I can!” she said, triumphantly, and they marched slowly, arm in arm, to Bock’s hermitage, as if calling heaven and earth to bear witness to their satisfaction. When they reached Bock’s nook, he said, “Wait here, Eilika! It is not befitting for thee to enter the chamber of a bachelor; I will fetch the book.”

She smiled coyly, and paced up and down the snowy earth till he reappeared, bringing the precious book.

“Here it is!” he cried; “now read me my name!”

Eilika unclapsed the cover and searched. Then standing upon tiptoe, she threw her arms about his neck, exclaiming, “Thy name is Benjamin!”

“Benjamin?” he repeated, with much emphasis. “Yea, that is right! And the sentence?”

“Oh! That is Latin; I understand it not. But come, now, let us come to our lord and lady, dear Benjamin Bock von Schlanstedt!”

CHAPTER XXXI.

NEVER had Count Albrecht remained so long inactive in his stronghold as during this winter, which lasted long, and put his impatient spirit to the test. Oda, on the other hand, was grateful for every flake of snow which helped to keep her restless husband by her side, as her entreaties alone might have failed in doing. She well knew that when the spring came and the sunshine thawed the frozen ways, Albrecht would don his harness once more and take up arms, of which he already began to speak. All the happiness which he now enjoyed could not keep him quiet; something forever urged him to add to his power and the lustre of the family name.

Oda's inheritance was still in the hands of the bishop of Halberstadt, the long winter having been favorable to the latter, enabling him to spin out the negotiations relating to Falkenstein in the most satisfactory manner to himself.

These negotiations were not carried on by Count Albrecht, but by Count Burchard von Mansfeld, who offered himself as intermediary. But Albrecht soon lost patience, and declared to his friend that if no decision were reached by spring, he would draw the sword, and thus bring matters to a speedy issue.

As the season advanced, and the bishop still kept his hold of the earldom, desirous, apparently, of avoiding hostilities, notwithstanding his secret preparations, Count Albrecht began to make ready to meet him in the field. Oda did all that she could to dissuade him from putting himself in peril for the sake of her inheritance. But her

prayers were of no avail, though it must be confessed his preparations proceeded but slowly.

Albrecht saw that this was to be the beginning of a struggle which must end in the overthrow of one or the other contestants, and he resolved not to be rash or overhasty, as he had been at the time of the siege of Quedlinburg. He therefore made his arrangements with great care, though this was not the cause of the unusual delay.

Count Albrecht was changed; he seemed ill at ease, and there was a hesitation and indecision about his orders which led to the waste of valuable time, which he could not rid himself of. Something seemed to paralyze his will, and take away his self-confidence. It was not fear: against that he was proof; and when he questioned himself, he was obliged to confess that it was due to the appearance of the templar. He was convinced that this had reference to the coming contest, and that some terrible thing threatened him, heralded by the uneasy spirit. All was at last in readiness, but, deterred by his forebodings, Count Albrecht lingered still, and such procrastination might well prove serious, if nothing more.

Bock von Schlanstedt, now for some time the contented husband of the happy Eilika, was under the same spell as his master, although no further allusion was made by either to the spectral appearance. He watched the count untiringly, and when the latter rode, as he sometimes did, with his shield-bearer, Schadow, to one or the other of his castles, Bock secretly followed him, ordering his four comrades to scour the neighborhood, to warn and aid the count of any approaching danger. Albrecht was aware of his presence, for Bock's big-boned steed was easily recognizable, and he was pleased by this devotion, but neither the count nor the others knew that he was being covertly watched and tracked by hired spies.

At the end of a beautiful spring day, in the latter part of May, Albrecht and Oda stood on the summit of Regenstein, gazing at the setting sun, and recalling the past and the many talks they had had together on this very spot. Albrecht looked grave, as he drew his wife closer to him. "Dost thou remember," she began, "how thou didst woo me here, for thy brother Siegfried? Didst thou not love me then thyself?"

"As much as I do now!" he answered; "but I had given him my word, and hadst thou consented —"

"Nay, Albrecht, I could never have done so, though I strove for a little to accustom myself to the thought. I loved thee alone, and thy pleading for Siegfried cost me many a bitter hour!"

"Forgive me, Oda!" he said, tenderly; "but now we are joined together, and nothing but death can separate us."

"Speak not of death, Albrecht! Life is so beautiful. Oh, I have a great dread of thy going forth to fight again —"

"Thou art a soldier's wife," he answered. "And if I return to thee victorious —"

"If thou returnest!" she repeated, terrified. "The bishop is a malignant foe, but he is not the worst. Fear-est thou not the abbess's revenge?"

"A woman's revenge!" he cried, scornfully. "What harm can a needle do an armed man?"

"There is much in song and legend of woman's revenge," she continued. "Albrecht, art thou, then, so sure of victory?"

"I was never before so well prepared as now."

"But yet I see a cloud on thy brow. Albrecht, give up this conflict, in which so much is at stake, and which can yield so little!" She hung upon his neck, stroked his

hair, and looked at him so tenderly with her blue eyes, that he was strangely moved.

He clasped her in his arms. "Foolish child!" he said, affectionately; "thou bluntest the edge of my sword with thy witcheries. Must I peradventure some day cast down my eyes, when a son of mine asketh me for his mother's inheritance?"

Oda hid her face on his breast, without answering.

"I will bring thee the keys of Falkenstein castle, my Oda. Will not that please thee?"

She shook her head, but not moving it from its resting-place. Then suddenly she asked, "Ridest thou not forth to-morrow for news?"

"Yea, to-morrow," he replied.

"Whither?"

"To Derenburg, and thence past Danstedt to Westenburg. I must furnish myself with more men, and look after the horses."

"And with whom?"

"With my *Schadow*," he replied, smiling; "but why dost thou ask?"

"Ah! if I could go with thee," she sighed; "my heart is so heavy."

"I will be with thee at eve," he assured her, but he felt himself oppressed in mind. Oda's words and trembling anxiety unnerved him more than he cared to show.

They were silent for a little, each seeking to read the other's heart. The rosy glow of sunset warmed Oda's pale cheeks, and made Albrecht's locks gleam like gold, whilst their shadows stretched out far behind them upon the rocks.

"Behold how gorgeously the sun sinketh," said Albrecht; "it biddeth farewell to one more beautiful day, which will never return."

"And the sun hath created its beauty, as thou hast created my happiness, Albrecht. Thou art my sun. All would be night, dark night, wert thou to leave me. I tremble at the thought of bidding thee farewell."

"Let us say good by now," he said, seriously.

"Now? To-day? Albrecht, thou art not going out to fight to-morrow."

"Nay, my love; but then might I steal away some morning before thou awakest, and spare thee the pain of a farewell."

"Albrecht, thy face looketh red, like blood!" she cried in affright.

"It is only the reflection of the setting sun," he said.

"The setting sun," she repeated, and began to sob upon his breast. He tried to soothe her, and holding her in his arms, he perceived that she shivered from head to foot.

"Come," said he; "it groweth cool here."

He led her carefully down the rocky steps, the sun having now quite disappeared below the horizon.

Next morning Count Albrecht sent Bock with a message to Benzingerode. As the latter saw Schadow saddling his own and his master's horses, he asked, "Whither ride ye to-day?"

"To Westerbürg," answered Schadow.

Thereupon Bock ordered Rupfer and Springwolf to follow the count slowly, without his knowledge, as far as Derenburg, and to wait there till he joined them with Nothnagel and Hasenbart. Then he rode off with the two latter.

Count Albrecht was soon in the saddle, and on the way, with Schadow, to Derenburg. It was a warm day, and he wore only a light shirt of mail, without his usual quilted buff coat. At Derenburg he was satisfied with what he

saw, and remained there but a short time, riding on, still with his shield-bearer, toward Danstedt, in order to reach Westerburg betimes.

As they trotted slowly along the hilly road, they saw at a little distance a single horseman, apparently a peasant, in a blue frock, riding in the same direction. They paid no attention to him, and he soon passed out of sight.

Suddenly, in a moment, near the hamlet of Danstedt, a body of men in the bishop's colors fell upon them. They rushed at Albrecht, with swords drawn, and their leader, no other than Rudolf von Dorstadt, cried out,—

“Ha, Robber Count! Dost thou remember the priest's hireling?”

Albrecht's sword flashed from its sheath like lightning, and he fought like a lion with Von Dorstadt, whose men meanwhile fell upon Schadow. The latter soon received a blow from a mace, and fell from the saddle. Count Albrecht was himself bleeding profusely from a wound upon the head, and could scarcely see what he was doing. Closely pressed on all sides, there was no chance of escape, and while he was parrying a blow, Rudolf von Dorstadt thrust his sword into his breast with such force that he sank back with a groan, and fell heavily to the ground.

The murderers galloped away, exulting, leaving their victims where they fell. One was alive; the heart of the other had ceased to beat.

Count Albrecht von Regenstein was no more.

Bock, with his two companions, coming from Benzingerode, met the other two near Derenburg, and riding toward Danstedt, encountered on the way two riderless horses, which they recognized as Count Albrecht's and Schadow's. At once they began madly spurring their own beasts, and following the prints of the hoofs, they soon

reached the fatal spot, and threw themselves headlong from their saddles.

"Dead! dead!" groaned Bock. "Just too late. He is not e'en cold."

He threw himself in wild despair upon his master's body, and only a stifled sob distinguished the living from the dead.

"Schadow liveth!" cried one of the men. And they were all instantly beside him. He breathed feebly, and after a little opened his eyes.

"Schadow!" cried Bock, "dost thou hear? Canst thou speak? Who hath done this?"

With great difficulty Schadow gasped, "Rudolf von Dorstadt, Albrecht von Bodenteich, Albert von Semmenstedt —"

"Only three?"

"And their men. Is Count —"

"Dead, Schadow; dead!" cried Bock.

"Then I'll not live!"

The four rough men, familiar with death as they were, stood looking on with dim eyes. Bock kneeled beside his master's form, unconscious of aught else, and the tears trickled down his weather-beaten cheeks.

At last Nothnagel touched his shoulder, saying, "We must bring them home."

Bock nodded his head slowly, and answered, "Go, get a wain!"

Then rising, and turning toward Regenstein, he muttered, "'T was here the templar looked on New-Year's night. He saw it all."

The men did not understand him. Three of them went to the village, and returned soon with a rough farm wain, in which they first laid the body of Count Albrecht. When they raised Schadow, they saw that he, likewise,

was dead. Then the mournful train slowly took its way to Regenstein. Bock rode in front, the four others behind. When they reached the castle, at noon, they almost expected to see the rocks crumble beneath their feet. Soon the news was told, and nothing was heard but cries and lamentation. Countess Oda at once fell into a death-like swoon; and during the terrible hours which followed, a son was born to her. Ursula and Eilika nursed them with tender devotion, and she and the child both lived.

Three days later, Count Albrecht's remains lay beside those of his brother Siegfried in the cloister of Michaelstein. A storm of indignation swept through the country at the news of this atrocious deed. The Count von Regenstein dead! The sturdy oak fallen, which had shadowed the land and sheltered the oppressed! From all parts of the Hartz, from Hackel and Huy, from the cities and villages, men looked toward Regenstein as if to assure themselves that its proud rocks still soared aloft, that it shared not in its lord's downfall. Fingers were pointed at the murderers, though all knew they were but the bishop's tools.

Two days after the deed, it was known he had left Petershof for one of his castles, probably Falkenstein. Vainly he protested his innocence. No one believed him; moreover, he retained the murderers in his service.

On the evening of the fatal day, a messenger appeared at the castle of Quedlinburg with a letter for the abbess. It contained these words in Latin: "What thou hast desired, is done; I await my reward."

A triumphant light burned in Jutta's dark eyes.

"Dead, and she a widow; I am avenged!"

But in the night, as she tossed about, now in fitful sleep, now in long hours of wakefulness, conscience-stricken and oppressed, she was beset by dreams and visions.

Count Albrecht came to her in the pride of manly beauty, and stretching out his hand, said, "Come, my beloved! Thou art mine!" But when she seized it, behold, it was icy cold; blood trickled through his chain mail, and his freezing glance pierced her soul, as he said, "Thou hast torn me from the arms of my wife; thou hast slain me by the hand of thy lover; before God's throne will I accuse thee." She awoke, trembling, and lay staring into the darkness, with wide-open eyes. Then again, in half-slumber, the bishop's youthful figure stood before her in the princely dress of the high-born page at the Wartburg. He looked at her eagerly, and whispered, "What thou hast wished, is done; grant me my reward; thou hast given me thy word." Then he took her in his arms and bore her away, and they seemed to float upon clouds, till suddenly she fell lost in a fearful abyss, and again awoke with a cry. Her head burned, and she seemed to feel it throb with each pulsation of the blood; wild, despairing thoughts chased one another through her brain. It seemed as if she would never sleep again. When morning at last dawned, her resolution was taken; after a bitter struggle, she had determined upon her course. Yesterday she was another woman. The nobly formed features now wore an air of sternness; no smile hovered about the full lips, and in her eyes was only an expression of rigid determination. She had clothed herself in black. Alone in her room, she wrote two letters: one to the bishop of Halberstadt and one to the abbess of the Walbeck convent, which belonged to that of Quedlinburg, and was in the earldom of Arnstein. Before she had finished the second, the canoness entered the room, horror in every feature of her face.

"Jutta!" she exclaimed, "prepare thyself to hear frightful tidings! Count Albrecht is slain!"

"I know it, Adelheid," answered the abbess, apathetically.

"Thou knowest it already?" said the other, in surprise. "Ah! I see; thou wearest black, but whence —"

"Listen to me; seek not to grieve me; it would be in vain," said Jutta, calmly. "I am going away; ask me not whither. To the others, I shall say, 'To the Wartburg, where I have promised to visit the Landgravine.' Hedwig will accompany me."

"But the escort —"

"I shall journey with an escort from the bishop, which I look for in two days. Thou alone shalt know now that I am not to return.

"Jutta! What meanest thou?"

"It meaneth — nay, not yet! Leave me, Adelheid! I will not go without bidding thee farewell. Send Hedwig to me; I will see no one else."

The canoness cast a troubled look upon her friend, and left the room.

Two days later the abbess and Hedwig von Hakeborn left the castle with the bishop's men, but the road they travelled did not lead to Thuringia.

Two or three weeks later Hedwig returned alone, telling no one where she had been with the abbess, but brought with her a letter from the latter, stating that Countess Jutta von Kranichfeld resigned her office of abbess of Quedlinburg and bade farewell to the chapter, having entered the convent of Walbeck, there to pass the remainder of her days in prayer and penance. She recommended, as her successor, the Countess Luitgard von Stolberg, who was soon after chosen abbess. With a natural desire for revenge, Albrecht's brothers, under Bernhard's lead, took up arms against the bishop, having been promised the aid of the Count of Mansfield. But their adversary was as strong

as they, and Count Albrecht was no longer at their head. The bishop had prolonged his misleading negotiations and avoided an open rupture, planning meanwhile to be rid of the only man whom he feared. Now, therefore, he ventured upon what he had never dared to do while Count Albrecht lived: he gave up acting on the defensive, and boldly attacked the Regensteins at every point. He took Castle Gersdorf by storm; invaded the earldom of Mansfeld, and laid it waste with fire and sword; marched northward, seizing Emersleben and Schwanebeck, and at length the hitherto impregnable fortress of Crottorf. Then he demanded a cessation of hostilities. He had attained his end, and acquired sovereign authority in the Hartz country. No one dared to question it; all bowed before him, now that their chief and champion, Albrecht von Regenstein, had departed. From the Oker to the Bode and far into Swabia his rule extended, and the principality of Halberstadt, founded by this wily and warlike prelate, maintained its independence for three centuries.

The ascendancy of the house of Regenstein was destroyed forever, but considerable possessions yet remained to it, wisely and peacefully governed by Beruhard till the majority of Albrecht's son. In him Countess Oda found her great and only consolation. She never regained her rightful inheritance of Falkenstein. Bock and Eilika were faithful to her, and all the young count's instructions in riding and handling his weapons were received from the loyal old knight.

A long line of brave and vigorous men did honor to the memory of their famous ancestor, Count Albrecht the Second, who was called by his enemies "The Robber Count." By this name he is known to this day in the speech and tradition of his native land, and the traveller who visits

the castle of King Heinrich the Fowler, and looks thence over the country, sees in the distance the precipitous Regenstein, where yet stands the remains of the mighty fortress, and directly beneath him is the old town of Quedlinburg, upon whose walls stand the towers which Count Albrecht was forced to build at his own cost. The convent he protected was in existence at the beginning of this century, until destroyed by Napoleon in 1803. It has been ruled over by thirty-six abbesses and one provost, Aurora von Königsmark. The last abbess, Princess Sophie Albertine, of Sweden, died in 1829, and an ancestor of the writer of this historic tale held the same office under her that Master Willekin held during the sway of the beautiful Jutta.

If the traveller passes out from the burying-place of King Heinrich, his wife, and grand-daughter, the Abbess Mathilde, through Jutta's portal, and descends the hill over the "Fowler's Ground," he will soon come to the stately old Town House. Here he is shown to-day "The Robber Count's" prison cage, as well as his weapons, hunting-pouch, spurs, and some of his letters; and if he should ask a Quedlinburg school-boy, "Can you tell me who Albrecht von Regenstein was?" he would probably be answered, with a smile, "Do you not know? Why, he was 'The Robber Count.'"

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